

# JACKIE BARBOSA

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Barbosa's books are not to be  
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bestselling author

## A BIT OF ROUGH



# A Bit of Rough

The House of Uncommons, Book One

Jackie Barbosa

Circe Press



**A Bit of Rough**  
**(*The House of Uncommons*, Book One)**  
Jackie Barbosa

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Author's Note

Also By Jackie Barbosa

First Comes Marriage

## Chapter One

❧

*“A woman’s only tangible asset is her virtue. Whether she guards it like a treasure or trades freely upon it, it is her one reliably marketable resource.” – Polly Dicax*

London, April 26, 1831

Lady Honora Pearce glanced furtively to her left and right before making the right turn onto Clerkenwell Road, where Rickert & Sons Printers was located in the center of the block.

Dressed as she was in male clothing, she should not be easily recognizable as the youngest daughter of the Earl and Countess of Ormondy, but she would be foolish to take chances. Even with her long brown hair tucked beneath her cap and her shape disguised by the clever cut of the jacket she wore over trousers, shirt, and waistcoat, there was a remote possibility of encountering someone who knew her and her family well enough to note the resemblance of this “boy’s” face to members of the Pearce family. Her father’s square jaw in combination with his silver-gray eyes, were difficult to conceal. But she saw no one on either side of the street who looked familiar to her, and the sidewalks bustled with activity. Under the circumstances, she thought it unlikely anyone would take particular notice of a youth carrying a small package in the direction of the print shop.

Despite her relative confidence that she was in no danger of being recognized, her stomach fluttered with nervous anticipation

as she strode down the pavement, weaving through the jumble of pedestrians who strolled sedately along and stopped every now and then to peer into a shop window.

She was about to meet Luke Evangelista.

Oh, she knew that was not his name, any more than hers was Polly Dicax, the *nom de plume* she affixed to the columns she wrote for half a dozen underground newspapers. No publisher of a paper like *The Weekly Disciple*, which not only advocated radical causes and revolutionary reforms but did not pay the required stamp taxes, could afford to publicly acknowledge his identity. Any more than she could allow her true name to be printed beneath her own militant compositions.

A portly gentleman in a top hat and bespoke suit exited the door of the shop adjacent to the printer and very nearly collided with her. Grateful for her trousers, which allowed for much greater mobility than heavy skirts, Honora managed to dodge him without his apparent notice, but her heart skittered as she realized how close a call it had truly been. The gentleman was none other than Lord Van Allen, who sat in the House of Lords with her father and to whom she had spoken face-to-face on more than one occasion. Had he been paying the slightest attention, she had no doubt he would have recognized her in a trice despite her disguise.

This was why she had never before attempted to personally deliver a column to any of her publishers. She would not have done so today, had she any other choice, but the messenger boy who normally performed the task had failed to appear at the designated time. When an hour and more had passed with no sign of him, she had concluded that he would not come at all. Since the only alternative to conveying the document herself would mean failing to deliver the expected column at all, she had chosen the lesser of two evils. While she did not depend upon the income she made from her essays for her living—her parents were both indulgent and broad-minded enough that they continued to support their spinster daughter without a hint of displeasure—she did not want the

publishers who paid for and printed her columns to think she did not care about fulfilling her promises. Not to mention that she liked earning her own pocket money; it gave her a sense of power and of purpose. And should her parents ever tire of housing and maintaining her...well, then she had the means to provide for herself.

Anxious to put Lord Van Allen well behind her, she quickened her steps and was within ten feet of her destination when a commotion rose up behind her. At the cries of distress and irritation, Honora glanced over her shoulder. A stone of dread formed in her chest. For there, pushing their way through the crowd and headed right in her direction—or more accurately, in the direction of the print shop—were three uniformed constables and a tall, aging man in a gray suit who could only be the magistrate.

*Bloody hell.*

Rickert & Sons was about to be raided by the police, no doubt on suspicion of printing untaxed periodicals. A suspicion that was in every respect accurate.

The wisest course of action would be for her to continue past the print shop and simply write off *The Weekly Disciple*—the only newspaper she wrote for that was printed by Rickert & Sons—as lost. Quite a few of the publications for which she had written had suffered similar fates, but another always sprung up soon enough. Radical underground periodicals were as plentiful and prolific as weeds in the spring, and Polly Dicax was a popular enough essayist that she could pick and choose between the newcomers when one of her existing publishers was put out of business.

And indeed, if the police had been in front of her or already inside the shop, she would undoubtedly have done the wise thing. But her conscience informed her they were at least thirty seconds behind her and therefore she had time to warn the unsuspecting owner and other occupants of the shop of the impending invasion. Perhaps it would be too late for them to conceal the evidence, but at least they would have a chance.



So she ran the rest of the way to the front door of the shop and burst through it, shouting her warning as she entered. "The constabulary is right behind me!"

Four men turned to look at her with a combination of perplexity and alarm. Three of the four must be Mr. Rickert and his eponymous sons, for they wore heavy leather aprons stained with ink over their workaday clothing. The first man was stout with graying hair; the other two appeared younger and, if not much leaner, then certainly fitter. One of the sons was setting type while the other operated the printing press.

The elder Mr. Rickert stood apart from the machinery and had been conversing with the fourth man, whose back had been turned to her when she entered the shop. This man's hair was very thick and very dark, the inky curls covering his jacket's collar. When he turned around, she saw that his skin was also a deep shade of tan, taut and unlined, and his features were finely hewn and arrestingly handsome. He wore a close-trimmed beard and mustache, and his sharp eyes burned into her like coal. Instinct more than reason told her he must be Luke Evangelista, and her pulse jolted into an even more erratic pace.

Fortunately, all of the men grasped the import of her words and did not stop to question her.

Mr. Rickert barked orders to the young men while beckoning her to approach him. "Pull out the nameplate and as much type from that frame as you can, James. George, make sure nothing's lying about that can get us into trouble." When Honora was within arm's reach of Rickert, he grabbed her left wrist and the other man's right. "Got to get the two of you out of sight. Come with me."

The printer didn't precisely drag them to the rear of the shop, but both she and the man she presumed to be *The Weekly Disciple's* publisher had to trot to keep up with him. Rickert steered them toward a door to the left of the press, releasing his grip on their wrists so he could throw it open. The interior was lined with shelves stacked with paper of varying weights and sizes and jars of

black, red, and blue ink.

“There’s a hidden compartment back here,” Rickert said, striding into the closet. Reaching the rearmost shelf, he shoved a roll of paper to one side and did something that caused a latch to click. He pulled on the shelf, which separated cunningly into two halves, and opened what was otherwise a completely undetectable door. “Get inside. I’ll come let you out when the coast is clear.”

Honora exchanged a glance with the man she presumed to be Evangelista. Beyond the opening in the wall, she could make out a space that looked to be no more than four feet wide by perhaps two feet deep. Once the door was closed again, there would be no light and precious little space or air for two people. If Rickert and his sons were carted off to the police station, who would release them?

Evangelista—if she was indeed correct about his identity—raised his eyebrows and shrugged, then stepped into the indicated chamber. She heard the shop door open and knew there was no time to consider an alternate means of escape. A frisson of fear laced with excitement rolled down her spine as she followed him inside. There was a solid clunking sound behind her, heralding the closure of the door as whatever mechanism Rickert had disengaged slid back into place.

It was completely dark, just as she had expected. What she hadn’t expected was the heat emanating from the male body next to hers or the slow, even sound of his breathing beside her ear or the intoxicating spice-and-musk scent of him in the air that surrounded her. Her eyes had already informed her that he was a comely specimen of the masculine persuasion, but she had seen plenty of attractive male persons in her lifetime and was thus somewhat inured to purely visual appeal. Too often, an alluring exterior belied a quite unpleasant interior.

But the lack of sight seemed to heighten her other senses and, to be fair, she had never been alone with any man in such a confined space. Perhaps that explained her body’s strange response to his physical proximity, for her skin felt too tight and her innards

strangely warm and soft. And, of course, if he *was* Luke Evangelista, then his mind was every bit as desirable as his body.

A shiver coursed through her limbs at the outrageousness of considering a man's body desirable. Goodness, not two minutes alone with this man, and she scarcely recognized herself. No wonder society mamas and papas were so keen on keeping the sexes either apart or under constant supervision.

"You are not Dicax's usual messenger boy."

She flinched, just a little, at the sound of his voice. He spoke quietly, not quite whispering, and the syllables rolled out like gentle waves lapping a lake shore. His accent was unfamiliar; though his pronunciation was perfect, there was a musical lilt to the words that must be native to some other language. Spanish, perhaps? Portuguese? Might he originally hail from the Philippines? Or Cape Verde? That would explain both his dark coloring and his penchant for editorializing on the evils of British despotism, although the question itself confirmed her suspicion as to his identity.

"No," she agreed, since there was no point in arguing his perfectly sound observation.

"In fact," he continued, his tone low and honey-smooth, "you are not even a boy."

Her internal organs did a wild somersault. This was a turn of events she had not anticipated. How had he penetrated her disguise when he had not seen her for more than half a minute? He might merely be guessing, in which case she should flatly deny the charge in the hope of maintaining the ruse. On the other hand, she did not want to risk antagonizing someone with whom she was trapped for who knew how long.

She settled on asking, "What makes you say that?"

He inhaled audibly. "I doubt there is any boy in London who smells like orange blossoms, Miss Dicax. Or is it Mrs.?"

Wry amusement colored his words, and she imagined at least one corner of his mouth might be dimpled with a smile. Why that should make everything below her waist go buttery-soft, she did not

understand. But she was well and fairly caught. Given how easily she could detect his scent, she should hardly be surprised he had perceived hers.

“Miss,” she admitted and immediately regretted it. Pretending she was married might have been wiser. But it was too late now. “The messenger boy failed to arrive today,” she went on, “and I didn’t have time to find someone else.”

“Poor timing all around,” he remarked. “I would prefer we had met under less...trying circumstances.” His rumbling chuckle was more of a caress than a sound and raised hairs from the nape of neck down to her wrists. “I cannot even sketch you a proper bow, for I know when I am in the presence of one of my betters.”

*Curse it!* She should have realized her accent would give away her class. On the other hand, if he had read anything she had written for his newspaper—and she felt certain he had—he would be well aware she considered the whole notion of birthright superiority to be utter hogwash.

So she responded, “You should not insult your sex so, sirrah. Or should I rather say Mr. Evangelista?”

Again, a low sound of mirth purred from his throat. “Touché, Miss Dicax. Though that name of mine really is a rather pretentious affectation. I wish I had been a trifle subtler in selecting my *nom de plume*. Yours is considerably cleverer. In fact, until just now, I was not certain that Polly Dicax was a woman, though your many discourses on the oppression of the female sex led me to suspect as much.”

Honora found herself unaccountably pleased by this compliment of her pen name. She wondered whether a majority of readers grasped the play on words, since doing so would require a working knowledge of both Latin and Greek. When she’d invented the pseudonym some six years earlier, the surname had come first: *Dicax* meant “sharp-tongued” in Latin. She’d then cast about for a synonym for “citizen” to use as a given name, but Latin had offered her no good options. Only when she’d begun to think of Greek

words had she hit upon “politis,” which she’d then shortened to Polly. She’d thought her invention quite witty at the time, but since she could hardly ask anyone else’s opinion, she’d had to keep her satisfaction to herself. To discover that Evangelista got the joke and thought it artful was altogether too gratifying. She was rather glad they were in the dark, for her cheeks were hot with a flush she would otherwise have been unable to conceal.

Taking an unsteady breath, she was about to remark that she considered his pen name altogether appropriate and not at all pretentious when the obvious *thunk* of someone deliberately banging on the door to the closet interrupted her. On the heels of the sound, she heard a muffled voice, which became intelligible when the door opened a few seconds later.

“—ly a storage room, your lordship.” Despite the intervening wall, Honora was certain the speaker was Mr. Rickert. “You inspected it on your last visit, if you recall.”

“And I’m inspecting it again,” a man responded curtly. The magistrate, no doubt. “Look for hidden compartments, lads. There’s got to be something we missed last time.”

Her knees weakened with dread as the rattle of shelves being pulled upon and the thud of items crashing onto the floor commenced. She winced at the unmistakable sound of glass shattering and, more on instinct than reflection, reached out in the darkness to grab onto the arm of man who stood beside her for support. Apparently understanding the mute request for reassurance, Evangelista placed his own hand over hers and gave it a soothing pat.

The wall in front of them shuddered but held firm despite the efforts of the police constables to locate the opening. Whatever mechanism Rickert had installed must be well-hidden and sturdy indeed, for the men were obviously putting considerable effort into their search.

Her heart raced like a frightened rabbit when a loud crack resounded in the tiny chamber. Certain their hiding place had been

discovered, she gritted her teeth and awaited the inevitable. She would be arrested, and her father would discover that she was behind the articles his colleagues in Parliament considered tantamount to treason. And while she would suffer little more than a restriction of her privileges, what about Mr. Evangelista? He had no wealthy, titled, politically powerful parent to protect him from spending weeks or even months in prison. Certainly, she would never see him again, and they had only just met.

Perhaps Evangelista had the same fear of detection, for he turned toward her and pulled her into his arms as though to shield her from the imminent invasion. She buried her face in his chest and squeezed her eyes closed, anticipating the sudden shock of light flooding into the room. His body was comfortingly warm and solid, and his scent was more pronounced, the spicy aroma of anise and clove becoming distinct from the heavier, sweeter undertones of fresh ale and clean human skin. The combination calmed her but also stirred a deep and primitive longing within her.

The noise abruptly ceased.

“Nothing, milord,” a gruff, Cockney-accented voice said. “If he’s hiding aught in here, me mum’s the queen.”

A short silence intervened, during which Honora imagined the magistrate ground his teeth and muttered imprecations under his breath. “Very well, sergeant,” he said at last. “It appears you’ve slipped the chain again, Mr. Rickert. But I *know* you’re printing *The Weekly Disciple* and eventually, I’ll prove it and put you and Evangelista out of business once and for all.”

The storeroom door slammed shut.

Honora lifted her head from his chest and opened her eyes, though the second act was futile, since it remained as pitch black as ever. “I suppose we are safe,” she murmured, although she made no move to escape his embrace. She liked it too much.

“On the contrary,” he said, his voice a gentle rumble, “I fear we are in greater danger than ever.”

And then his mouth closed over hers.

## Chapter Two

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*“The browner a man’s skin, the less inherent worth is imputed to him, and this is true even amongst the natives of this isle, for a pale complexion is prized as a sign of good breeding while a dark one is reviled as the mark the lowborn laborer.” – Luke Evangelista*

Lucas knew better. Kissing Miss Dicax was without a doubt the most reckless, most foolish, and most inappropriate thing he had ever done in his life. The fact that she clung to him in the dark was no excuse. Neither was his certainty that she was every bit as aroused by their proximity and the danger they had just weathered as he was. Those were reasons for being tempted, not justifications for succumbing.

He would have stopped immediately had she offered the slightest resistance or even demonstrated indifference to his attentions. While he might not be a gentleman in the classic sense of the word, he would never force his attentions on an unwilling woman. But when his mouth touched hers, he met nothing but eagerness and invitation. Her lips were sweet and soft, and when he deepened the contact, she responded with the same ardor and intensity that characterized her writing. However precarious her position or dangerous the cause, this woman threw herself into the enterprise with reckless abandon.

Her complete enthusiasm undid him. Desire surged through him, heating his blood and coiling in his loins like a loaded clock spring. Had he ever felt *want* like this? Yearning so bone-deep, it more resembled *need*.

Why *her*? Why *now*?

After all, he had no clear idea what she even looked like. He'd barely caught a glimpse of her features beneath the cap she'd pulled low over her brow. At best, he'd got a hint of a strong, square chin and a pert nose before Rickert had herded them into the chamber and closed the door.

And it didn't matter at all. She could be a veritable Medusa for all he cared. Here in the dark, he could explore her with senses far more trustworthy than mere sight. Since she was clothed in male garb, his eyes could not have recognized her supple, sumptuous figure, but he could certainly *feel* the lush swell of her breasts and the generous curves of her waist and hips as she pressed herself tight against him. The skin of her cheek, which he cradled in his calloused palm, was velvety smooth, and her lips were plump and pillowy. He'd noticed her orange-and-rosewater scent right away, but her taste—which he could now fully appreciate with his questing tongue—was every bit as intoxicating, like honey and cream and tart, fresh fruit. Nor could his eyes have appreciated the throaty hums of pleasure she made or the answering thunder of his pulse in his own ears.

Gods, he could kiss her for days and never be satiated.

She was a feast, and not just for his physical senses, but for his intellect as well, because this was a woman whose mind he knew nearly as well as his own. Never mind that they had never met in person, that he had no idea of her true name, or that he was certain, having heard her cultured accent, that she was a member of the upper classes he normally shunned. He had read every treatise she had ever written since she'd first deigned to publish her work in *The Weekly Disciple* and in nearly every particular, he agreed with her propositions, analyses, and conclusions. She was as close to a soul mate as a man could have, and so it seemed right and natural that he should kiss her, that he should desire her. That she should be *his*.

In all honesty, he was not sure what would have happened next



if he hadn't heard the loud clunk that betokened someone releasing the latch to the hidden door. She must have heard it too, because they leapt apart simultaneously—or as far apart as they could within the boundaries of the chamber, which was not nearly far enough to compensate for how close he had been to doing something truly unforgivable.

Light flooded the space, dazzling in comparison to total blackness, although in truth, it could not have been very bright at all. Lucas raised an arm to shield his eyes as the portal opened to the full, and Rickert said, "You can come out of there now, but you'll both have to stay until closing time, which won't be for several hours."

"Several hours?" Miss Dicax repeated, a quaver in her husky voice.

Lucas wondered how much of that quaver was due to anxiety at the prospect of being unable to leave the print shop and how much to what had just transpired between them. He tried very hard to wish it was more the former than the latter, but he did not entirely succeed. Honesty compelled him to admit he hoped the kiss had devastated her as thoroughly as it had him.

Dropping his arm and blinking, he found he could make out Rickert in silhouette, though his eyes had still not adjusted sufficiently to allow him to discern the man's rough-hewn features. After stepping through the doorway, he started to turn to offer his hand to assist Miss Dicax to exit when it dawned upon him that, as far as the printer knew, she was a *he*. Lucas wasn't sure which would be worse—for Rickert to realize she was no boy or to deduce what they had been up to while still misapprehending her sex—but he did not think either would be desirable.

"I imagine the boy has other business to attend to," he told Rickert gruffly. "Keeping him here much longer will undoubtedly have a negative effect on his daily wages."

The other man nodded. "I ken it's not good for him, but Lord Hornsby believed we'd had someone in the shop besides my sons

and me, which means he may have had someone watching the door before he and his ruffians showed up. That's why they were so sure they had us." Heading back to the storage room door, he added over his shoulder, "I've set the newspaper boys to keep watch for the rest of the day and warn us if we're about to have another visit from the Peelers, but the only way I can think of to get you both out safely is to have you leave at closing time wearing my sons' clothes and have them stay behind for a bit."

"But..." Miss Dicax protested, close enough behind him that Lucas knew she'd come out of their hiding place, "I can't stay here all day." In what he recognized as an effort to conceal both her sex and her social class, she spoke in a reasonable approximation of a London street accent and kept her voice in a low register. "Mr. Evangelista is right. I'll be missing me work."

The three of them trooped out of the storage room and Rickert closed the door, though he left the secret door open, possibly in anticipation of the need to access the chamber in haste again.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped, lad. That is, unless you'd like to take your chances of being arrested and interrogated. Either way, I don't think you'd be getting any more deliveries done today."

*Damn it.* Rickert was right, but that didn't solve the problem for Miss Dicax. While Lucas didn't know exactly who she was, he did know that an unmarried lady of quality could not go absent on her own for half a day without repercussions. If she'd truly been a messenger boy, he could at least have compensated her for the loss of a day's wages. He could do nothing, however, that would compensate for the damage to her reputation and, possibly, the imposition of restrictions on her future freedom. While he was certain she was an adult, for she had been writing and publishing her work for more than six years now, he could not imagine that she did not still live under her parents' roof. Wealthy or aristocratic parents tended to take a dim view of their unmarried daughters gallivanting about the city for hours at a stretch without a chaperone.

He could see no alternative to the one Rickert had proposed, however. Lucas just wished there was some way to protect Miss Dicax from the consequences. And that there was some way he could forget that damnably foolish kiss, which was going to haunt his dreams for quite some time to come.

Rickert clearly knew a windfall when he encountered one,

Lucas reflected. Having been forced to dismantle most of the typeset for the front page of this week's issue of *The Weekly Disciple*, he now recognized that he had two additional pairs of hands for the remainder of the day. In exchange for their help in packaging and assembling the day's books and periodicals for delivery, Rickert offered Lucas a ten percent discount on the printing of his own publication and Miss Dicax a threepence in wages.

Fully cognizant as he was of her circumstances, Lucas had to turn away to cover his wry amusement when Rickert proposed the amount as if it were a king's ransom, but Miss Dicax accepted the sum with great gravity and gratitude.

Once they had been set to the task, Rickert wandered off to oversee the compositing and printing of *The Weekly Disciple*, an activity that produced sufficient noise to allow Lucas and Miss Dicax to converse without danger of being overheard. In point of fact, they nearly had to shout to hear one another when the press was running at full tilt.

"I feel I must apologize—" he began.

"Don't," she interrupted, and he got his first good look at her face, for she raised her head to meet his gaze directly.

Gods help him, she could certainly turn a man to stone, but not because she was distasteful to look at. Quite the contrary. He would hazard a guess, in fact, that society must account her one of the

most beautiful women of her generation. Oh, he supposed some might consider the squareness of her jawline a bit too hard or object that her lips were a bit too wide, but in his view, these made her features more attractive. More defined and more interesting. Her slender, elegant nose would not look out of place on a Greek statue of Aphrodite or Athena except that a few freckles dusted the bridge, suggesting she wasn't entirely careful about keeping her face shielded from the sun.

It was her eyes, however, that truly stunned him. Large and dark-lashed, they were an arresting shade of gray so pure that he would have called them polished silver if that had not seemed fanciful. And those metallic irises met his without embarrassment or modesty.

The heat that had only recently vacated his body welled upward in his loins again, and he felt ashamed of himself. Hadn't he just told himself her appearance was a matter of no consequence to him? Yet here he was, mooning over purely physical characteristics, which were hardly any measure of true desirability.

"If you apologize for kissing me," she said sternly, a hint of a smile playing upon her lush mouth, "I shall be quite put out."

To his chagrin, his cheeks heated with a blush. Despite his complexion, which was much darker than the typical Briton's, he knew the rush of color would be evident to her. "I did think I ought to do that," he admitted.

"Then I beg you to stop." She held up her hand to block his words. "Because if you do so, I will be obliged to pretend that I regret it, too, and I do not. On the contrary, I wish to thank you."

"Thank me?" he echoed, nonplussed.

Her nod was firm and brisk. "Indeed. I found it quite educational." After glancing toward the printing press to be certain they were not being listened in on, she lowered her voice and added, "Until today, I could not fathom why everyone makes such a fuss about such things. Now..." She shrugged. "Now I quite understand." A sultry smile curved her lips and, gods help him, had

they been alone, he would have kissed her again.

Wrestling his frustrated lust under control, he said in a facsimile of his own voice, "Very well then, but I still must express my regret that you are trapped here for the remainder of the day. I sincerely hope that you do not suffer unduly for it."

Stacking several copies of Catherine Gore's *Pin Money* in a box intended for the purpose, she frowned and shook her head. "Questions will be asked and recriminations delivered, but I am twenty-five years old and my parents are..." her lips compressed and twisted as she searched for the correct word, finally settling on, "...unorthodox in their attitudes. They won't be happy that I was absent for the better part of a day, but my mother believes I should have the same freedoms as she allowed my older brothers at my age—with some exceptions related to safety, of course—and my father does his best not to contradict her, even when I suspect he would very much like to."

Lucas raised his eyebrows. Not just at her description of her parents but at the disclosure of her age. She was several years older than he had supposed—nearly his contemporary, in fact—and this took him aback. Most women married by the time they were twenty-one or twenty-two. To be honest, he could not quite credit that she would get off as lightly as she imagined, but he supposed she knew her family better than he did. Not for the first time, he wondered *who* that family was. But it would be improper—if not downright dangerous—to ask.

He settled for saying, "Nevertheless, I feel obliged to point out that we have not yet slipped the noose. There is still some chance we will be caught, either because the constabulary makes a return visit or because the person they've set to watch the place does not believe we are James and George." Placing several more copies of the Gale book alongside the others in the box, he grimaced and added, "I cannot help but believe your parents would be considerably more displeased if you were to be arrested. Are they... That is, do they know that you write such, er, scandalous content

for periodicals which are not strictly legal?”

“They know about *some* of my writings and therefore about some of my publications. I have more than one pseudonym.”

“Indeed? How many?” This woman really was full of surprises.

“Three,” she answered easily. “Although I stopped writing as Mary Weather some time ago.”

Lucas couldn’t help himself; his eyes widened with astonishment. Mary Weather was the popular and acclaimed author of a dozen morality tales for children, all of which had been published between 1821 and 1828. Although he’d never read any of them, he’d heard them praised by people of all social classes, for the moral of the story was often that the character portrayed as a wealthy aristocrat was less trustworthy and ethical than the poor, downtrodden commoner.

The first Mary Weather story had been enormously successful, printed and reprinted in multiple periodicals over the next several years and was, occasionally, reprinted even today. If she was twenty-five now, that meant the first had been published when she was only fifteen!

Apparently unaware of his awestruck admiration, she went on, “Of the three, however, Polly Dicax is the only one they don’t know about it.” Shifting on the stool Rickert had provided, she sighed. “It would be difficult for my father to discover that I am she. He has several colleagues who consider her writings to be tantamount to treason, and while he has not precisely agreed with that assessment, he has taken the position that her opinions are sensational and not in the best interests of the crown.” She smiled, which was dazzling, and shrugged. “But his making that discovery was a risk I was willing to take when I decided to warn you all that the shop was about to be raided. I had the choice to walk by, but I did not, because whatever consequences may come my way, they will be insignificant compared to what you and Mr. Rickert would suffer.”

Despite Lucas’s familiarity with her positions on everything from the legal standing of women to the treatment of the poor to the

British Empire's exploitation of foreign lands and peoples, he was still shaken by the realization that she had deliberately put herself at risk for the sake of virtual strangers. And not just any strangers, but people she must know were far beneath her on the social hierarchy: commoners of modest means who toiled for a living. He ought to have expected it of her, of course, yet he found her willingness to make such a sacrifice breathtaking, for he had not realized until she'd mentioned it that she'd had a choice. As a man who fought his battles primarily through words, he believed in the power of the pen as much as that of the sword, but he was also well aware that self-preservation often trumped even the most ardently held principles when actions were required.

Polly Dicax had not shied from the sword. Indeed, she had placed her neck directly beneath it, knowing full well the risk she took.

And gods help him, he admired her for it. In fact, he was very much afraid that "admiration" was far too cool a word for the emotion she aroused in him.

## Chapter Three

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*“All inequity springs from a single source—the notion of birthright supremacy. Once a society has accepted this proposition as given, then all other accidents of birth allow people to find some innate quality upon which to lord it over their fellows, be it nationality, skin color, or sex.” – Polly Dicax*

By the time darkness began to gather outside the shop

windows, Honora was exhausted. She had never performed so much physical labor in so short a period of time. After packing multiple boxes of books and periodicals for distribution, Rickert had enlisted her and Mr. Evangelista in the assembly and folding of all eight hundred copies of the newly printed issue of *The Weekly Disciple*.

The paper consisted of three sheets, each of which was stacked separately on a single table, with the center sheet at one end and the front/back at the other. To compile a single copy, one began by nesting the center sheet inside the second, then the center and second into the third until all five were stacked together. These were then folded in half lengthwise and in thirds the other direction so as to fit inside a newspaper boy's hip bag. The process was simple, but strenuous nonetheless, since it could not be accomplished without walking from one end of the table to the other, over and over again.

Not to mention that, as she worked, her fingers blackened with ink, and she had to take extreme care not to touch her clothing lest she stain them. To an untrained eye, her coat and breeches might



appear simple enough, but they'd been tailored specifically for her so as to disguise her feminine figure while still fitting comfortably, and she did not want to be forced to commission another set.

Honora had been wearing male clothing since childhood, for her mother had been firmly convinced that girls had every bit as much right to the freedom of movement afforded by breeches and sturdy boots as boys. Moreover, the countess continued to keep several suits of male clothing on hand for occasions when she wished to conceal her sex, and she had made certain her daughter could do the same. What the countess might not be so approving of were the reasons Honora found herself in need of a new set should she besmirk the suit as the result of her current activities.

As the stacks dwindled to the last twenty or so pages, Mr. Evangelista said, "Why don't you sit down and rest? I can finish these."

Honora's instinct was to object that she was fine, but the truth was that she was unaccustomed to spending so much time bending and stooping, not to mention standing. With a grateful nod, she sank onto a nearby stool and watched as Mr. Evangelista worked his way swiftly through the remaining copies.

He moved with an easy, efficient grace that made her think of a large jungle cat, perhaps a leopard or a jaguar. Though, to be fair, she had never seen such animals in life, so she might be imagining their agility and sinuousness quite wrongly. Notwithstanding, the image of a black jaguar lodged itself in her mind, and she could not shake it, especially not when she recalled the power—and the subtlety—of his kiss.

She had been kissed before, of course. Honora had been launched into society in the usual manner, with her parents footing the bill for a lavish round of balls and parties and the like. At first, she'd found the activities and attention exciting, but the bloom had come off the rose when she discovered most of the people she met were very much like the pretentious pigs and conceited cockerels she depicted in her Mary Weather tales—vain, shallow, selfish, and

untrustworthy.

Still, in the early, heady days before she had concluded that the haute ton was not for her, no fewer than seven gentlemen had asked to pay her court. They had ranged in rank and age from an earl older than her father to a baronet who could not have been more than few months her senior, if that. Of these, Honora had accounted four of them attractive enough in personality and appearance to warrant at least cursory consideration. And so, she had offered each of the four an opportunity to kiss her. One had been so shocked by the forwardness of her invitation that he had immediately withdrawn his suit. The other three...well, suffice it to say that she had concluded kissing was a singularly overrated activity. Why anyone would voluntarily subject herself to such an intimacy when the experience ranged from sloppy and nauseating to dry and boring?

But now she knew. Because Mr. Evangelista's kiss had been nothing short of glorious. When his mouth had claimed hers, she'd felt neither distaste or embarrassment, but a strange, curling heat in her abdomen that reminded her of hunger but which was something else entirely. Her body had ached with emptiness and longing, yet the sensation had been pleasurable rather than uncomfortable. She had wanted him to go on kissing her, and when he'd been forced to end it by Mr. Rickert's return, she'd been frustrated and irritated because she'd been desperately curious to find out what he might do next.

What was it about Mr. Evangelista that had made her reaction to him so different? Perhaps he was more skilled at kissing, though to be honest, she doubted that could be the whole explanation. Lord Hutchence, at least, had possessed a reputation for being popular with the ladies, and his attentions had been neither clumsy nor awkward; but she could see now with the benefit of hindsight that there had been no real desire for her in him, either. For *now* she understood what passion and emotion felt like, tasted like, smelled like.

Taking care not to touch her clothes with her inky hands, she studied Mr. Evangelista from under the brim of her cap. Objectively, she supposed he was not the most handsome man she had ever seen, but he had an appeal that went beyond mere physical attractiveness. He radiated strength and vitality, not just of body, but of character, and that energy fascinated and made her hunger for more.

As if to punctuate the thought, her stomach rumbled with an entirely different sort of hunger, reminding her that she had not eaten since breakfast. Everyone else in the print shop had likely had luncheon shortly before her arrival, but mealtimes in an aristocratic household seldom matched those of the working class, being generally later to allow household staff time to consume their own meals and also to accommodate the late-night activities the upper classes were wont to enjoy.

“What I wouldn’t do for a pork pasty right about now,” she muttered aloud, more to herself than to Mr. Evangelista, who had nearly reached the bottom of the pile.

He glanced at her with raised eyebrows. “Missed luncheon, have you?”

“And afternoon tea,” she said, shaking her head ruefully.

“I could ask Mr. Rickert to send one of his sons out to fetch you something. I’m sure he would oblige.”

“Good gad, no. If I am to maintain my façade as a messenger boy, I cannot behave like a spoiled Corinthian who is accustomed to being fed at a whim.”

Mr. Evangelista folded the paper he’d just assembled into thirds and placed it with the others. “True, but we could tell him you missed your midday meal to complete this delivery. I doubt he would question that explanation.”

“Perhaps not, but I don’t think it worth the risk. I can wait. I am not so pampered that I’ll melt away through missing a meal or two. Besides, the daylight is fading. It can’t be long now until Mr. Rickert closes up for the night.”

As she spoke, Mr. Evangelista compiled another paper and added it to the completed ones. Glancing at the printing press, which George and James Rickert were still operating at a rapid pace, he shrugged. "I'm not so certain. Our presence today means they can get ahead of tomorrow's work, and Rickert isn't one to squander his good fortune. I suspect they'll go on for an hour or more yet."

Honora pressed her hand to her midsection at this prediction and then glanced down at the front of her dark blue jacket in alarm. To her relief, she saw no ink smudging the fabric and gave herself a stern reminder to keep her hands at her sides. "Then I shall just have to find some way to keep my mind off of pork pasties. Though it is very difficult, now that I've imagined one, to get them out of my head. I find them quite delicious, don't you?"

"They can be very tasty," he agreed, "but I would prefer them if the filling was a bit less bland."

"Bland? Truly?" That was the last word she would have used to describe the salty, savory filling of the pork pasties of her acquaintance. "What would you have instead?"

"One of my mother's tamals," he answered immediately, his expression growing far off and wistful.

"What on earth is a tah-mahl?" she asked, testing the strange word on her tongue.

He chuckled. "I suppose you could say it's my people's version of a pasty. We use a meal made from maize instead of flour to make the dough, and they're steamed rather than baked or fried, but on the whole, the concept is similar. They can also be either savory or sweet, but the savory ones are usually also made with spicy chilis in the filling and sometimes in a sauce that's poured over the tamale before it's eaten."

"Like curry?"

"Similar, but not the same. My part of the world has different spices than India."

And here was the opening she had craved since laying eyes on

him. She had been certain that his heritage could not be entirely British, but asking straight out had felt wrong somehow. As though she would be questioning his right to consider himself an Englishman simply because he did not look like one. He certainly had every bit as firm a command of the language as any Briton born and bred, though there was that lilt... Her curiosity would not allow her to leave the question unasked. "And what part of the world is that?"

"New Spain. Or, as it is now known, Los Estados Unidos de Mexico." He pronounced the word "Mexico" with the stress on the middle syllable and with an *h* sound in place of the *x*.

As soon as he mentioned New Spain, his coloring and slight accent made perfect sense. Why that possibility had not occurred to her, she could not say, but then, Great Britain was such a long way from the New World. Though, now that she thought of it, certainly no further than the Philippines. Regardless, he was very far from his native soil, and not even in a country where people spoke what his native tongue.

"How do you come to be living in London? That is, if you do not mind my asking," she added, wincing inwardly at the forwardness of the question.

He appeared unperturbed, however, for he responded quickly enough. "My father was born there, to parents of Spanish ancestry. My mother is mostly Mayan Indian, although her family claims descent from one of the first Europeans ever to arrive in the New World, Gonzalo Guerrero, and his Mayan consort, Zazil Ha. As a consequence of my mother's ancestry, my father became quite a fervent advocate for the emancipation of Mayans and other indigenous Mexicans. My parents were forced to flee the country in 1811 because my father's beliefs led him to become an associate of Father Hidalgo. Do you know who he was?" When Honora shook her head, he continued, "He was the first leader in Mexico's War of Independence. Hidalgo wanted not only independence from Spain, but more rights and equality for all the people. After Hidalgo's

capture, my father could not remain in New Spain without risking arrest and execution himself.”

Honora vaguely remembered that New Spain had won its battle for independence during her late teens, but she knew very little about any of the events surrounding that victory. She wished now that she had paid more attention. “But why come to England?” she wondered aloud. “Would your family not have been safe in America? It’s ever so much closer.”

“True, but my father had contacts in Great Britain’s government and none in the U.S. He knew he would be able to find work here as a translator, since he speaks and writes multiple languages, including English, Spanish, and French. And indeed, he was soon hired by the British diplomatic service.”

“I see. I wonder if my Uncle Thomas knows him?” she mused. As soon as the words had departed her lips, however, she wanted to recall them. Not because there was any danger to her from Mr. Evangelista knowing her true identity—not at this point, at any rate—but because it might give *him* reason to fear she would attempt to ferret out *his*. “Not that I would know how to ask him, of course,” she added quickly. “I feel fairly certain your father is not called Mr. Evangelista!”

“No,” Mr. Evangelista agreed, his lips twitching. “In fact, I suspect he would cross himself and immediately rush off to confession if anyone were to equate him to any of the saints. He is scandalized enough that I use it.” Turning, he finished putting together the final paper and leaned his hip against the table as he folded it. “And to be quite honest, hearing you say it makes me feel as though I’m inviting a lightning strike. All in all, I think I would prefer it if you would call me Mr. Delgado.”

Her heart bounced like an eager puppy that had been offered a special treat. By revealing his real surname to her, he was expressing a profound degree of trust in her, for armed with this knowledge, she could betray him to the authorities. She wouldn’t, of course, but he could not be sure of that. But she knew of one way

she could demonstrate that she both understood and appreciated the gravity of his confidence. “Then I suppose you must call me L —” She broke off before pronouncing her courtesy title, not because she thought it would reveal too much about her, but because she did not want the barrier of class between them. “Miss Pearce,” she corrected and then, nodding in the direction of the Rickerts, added, “Or, perhaps Master Pearce for the nonce.”

A flicker of emotion—recognition of the surname, she wondered, or did he understand why she’d chosen to forgo her courtesy title?—crossed his features before his face broke into a broad grin at her suggestion that he call her Master Pearce. “I may find that a bit of a challenge,” he admitted, then forced his lips into a sober line. “But I shall persevere.”

At the mock gravity of his expression, she couldn’t suppress a laugh. When his laughter joined hers, a luxuriant warmth spread through her limbs. Never before had she shared such a sense of companionship and understanding with a man who was not a member of her family, and until this moment, she’d never realized how important it was to her to be seen and treated as an equal by a man she admired. Not to mention one she desired in a way she’d never expected to want any man.

She’d thought herself immune to the needs of the flesh and had considered herself lucky for it, especially once she had learned that any income she earned would belong to her husband if she married. Spinsterhood had never suited a woman better than it suited Honora, for no man had ever interested her enough intellectually or physically for her to feel she was missing anything.

Until now.

There was little chance that they would see each other again after today, however. Not only that, but under what possible circumstances *could* they meet again? They were unlikely to encounter one another in the daily course of their lives, and she could hardly invite him to stop by Pearce House for tea and biscuits, after all.

No, this would have to be their first and last meeting. But she very much suspected that her days of satisfied spinsterhood were over.



## Chapter Four

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*“The law and justice are, at best, passing acquaintances.”* – Luke Evangelista

Lucas’s prediction proved accurate, and another hour passed before Rickert announced his readiness to close the shop for the night. When the three of them finally exited the print shop, the hour was past seven, and the sun had been near enough to setting that the street and sidewalk lay in shadow, though they remained crowded with pedestrian and vehicle traffic. This, however, was all to the good, for the lack of illumination and clear sight lines would interfere with any scout’s ability to penetrate his and Miss Pearce’s disguises, such as they were.

In point of fact, neither of them was so much disguised as concealed, for each had simply donned an overcoat and scarf belonging to one of the brothers and pulled their hats down low over their brows. From the shop, they walked briskly—but not so briskly as to suggest they were in an unseemly rush—to the home Mr. Rickert shared with his wife and sons.

Located near the corner in a row of brick terraces, the Rickerts’ apartment occupied the two lower floors of the four-story building. After ushering them through the front door into the narrow entryway and divesting them of their rudimentary disguises, Rickert led them through to the back door. This emptied into a walled back garden and, beyond that, an alley that could be accessed through a gate. By this expedient, Lucas and Miss Pearce made good their escape and thence to the well-traveled Goswell Road several blocks

to the north.

From here, he could walk the roughly two miles to his lodgings on the border between Covent Garden and Seven Dials in half an hour. Indeed, he had walked it in the other direction earlier in the day. He could scarcely expect Miss Pearce to walk alone to whatever neighborhood her family called home, however, as that was not likely to be anywhere near their current location in solidly middle-class Islington. Not that he thought she was not physically up to the task, but even in her present costume, at this time of night she would be a ripe target for cut-purses, pickpockets, and worse.

He was considering how he might broach the subject of accompanying her on foot to her destination when she stepped to the curb and held up a hand to flag down a hackney. Blinking in surprise, he tried to sort through his thoughts. For him, the cost of a two-mile hackney ride was so exorbitant that he had not even considered the possibility. For Miss Pearce, however, several shillings were likely little more than pocket change.

Over the course of the past several hours, he had fallen into an easy rapport with her and been lulled by that comfort into imagining they were equals. That there could be something between them beyond a kiss and an afternoon of conversation. But they were not, and there could not. She was a Lady—with a capital *L*, for he had not missed her near slip of the tongue when they'd traded names—while he was a commoner and, more to the point, not even an Englishman. He possessed none of the qualities—not of birth, not of wealth, not even of nationality—that would make him fit to sit at her dinner table, much less to occupy her bed. Or her heart.

The hackney pulled to a stop, and the top-hatted driver gave Miss Pearce a thorough once-over, his expression dubious.

She hesitated just long enough that Lucas suspected she had forgot she did not precisely look the part of someone who could afford to hire a hackney. Then she turned round to face him and said in a deferential tone, "Come now, sir. Here's our lift."

He blinked at her for a second before comprehension dawned. She might be dressed as an adolescent messenger boy, but he wore a respectable frock coat, his best waistcoat, and good trousers which, while hardly bespoke, befitted a gentleman who might possess the necessary readies.

“Of course.” Shaken from his bewilderment, he took several lively steps in the direction of the hackney, but allowed her to sprint ahead of him to open the door as if she were his faithful servant.

“Where to, sir?” the driver asked.

Mr. Delgado glanced at Miss Pearce expectantly, since he had no idea of her direction.

She gave a minuscule shake of her head. “Your address.”

He frowned at her. What was she up to?

“Trust me,” she whispered.

Under other circumstances, he might have put up more of an argument, but he could scarcely do so with the driver awaiting his answer. “47 Neal Street.”

The driver’s face broke into a broad grin. Islington to Covent Garden would be a fine fare. “Very good, sir,” he responded, tipping the brim of his hat.

Quashing the gentlemanly impulse to allow her to enter first, Lucas stepped into the carriage, and she clambered in after him, pulling the door shut. When they were both seated on the narrow bench, he tapped the roof twice to indicate they were ready, and the hackney lurched into motion.

The interior of the coach was dark and small—though not as utterly black or cramped as the storage closet had been—but he was every bit as aware of the proximity of her lush, female body next to his and of her tantalizing scent as he had been in those confines.

Lucas sternly bade his nether appendage to behave itself and asked in as even a tone as he could manage, “Why are we on the way to my address instead of yours?”

“How will I know you made it home safely unless I see you

arrive there myself?"

"I might ask you the same question."

She shrugged. "Once we arrive at your address, you will give the hackney driver directions to deposit me at my destination and pay him the full fare with the promise of an additional tip at the end of the journey."

"So you mean to provide me with your address?"

"Certainly. How else would you give it to the driver?"

This got better and better, yet worse and worse. He'd given her his real name because he'd hated hearing his puerile pseudonym on her tongue. When she'd given him hers—or at least a version of it—he had known it would only be a matter of time before he discovered exactly who she was. His copy of *Debrett's Peerage* might be nearly ten years old, but he did not doubt she would be in it.

It was one thing, however, for them to know one another's real names. Addresses represented a different problem altogether. One he could—and would—resist, of course. He had no illusions as to the sort of reception he would receive if he showed up on her doorstep. What he would not be able to resist, he felt sure, was the fantasy that she might turn up on his. The hope—and the fear—that she'd do exactly that was going to keep him awake at night. Likely with his cock firmly in his fist.

"And you can be secure in the knowledge that I won't do something foolish like get out of the hackney and walk the rest of the way," she continued, oblivious to his wayward thoughts, "if for no other reason than the longer I am absent from home, the more difficult it will be for me to explain."

"All the more reason we should have gone directly to your residence rather than mine. I am a grown man, after all."

"And I am a grown woman," she retorted with some heat.

As if he needed to be reminded of this particular fact. "You do not look like one at the moment," he pointed out, aiming for an equable tone.

Her breath left her in a huff of amusement, and some of the

tension drained out of the tiny space. “You are right about that. But then, none of this day could have happened if I’d gone out dressed as L—like a lady, and I should very much regret that.”

Lucas would regret it, too, for he would have been arrested without her intervention. He doubted, however, that this was the part of the experience she was thinking of. Modest in both means and pride he might be, but Lucas knew when a woman was enjoying herself in his arms, and Miss Pearce had been an enthusiastic accomplice in that reckless kiss. If she had derived half as much pleasure from the encounter as he had, then they were both well and truly damned, for they could never, *must* never repeat it.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “we must do our best to forget that today ever happened and go back to the way things were before.”

That way involved the use of two small office spaces, which he leased under another assumed name. He received submissions and other messages from his writers at one address and sent payments and his responses to them at the other. The authors could pick up their mail directly from the second address or, if they could afford it—and Miss Pearce certainly could—have it picked up by messenger. In this manner, he was able to communicate with his contributors while maintaining his and their anonymity. Given that *The Weekly Disciple* was an illegal newspaper due to nonpayment of the requisite stamp taxes—which were exorbitant and made the publication of all but the most popular periodicals virtually impossible—this was the best way to ensure both he and his contributors kept their jobs.

But in Miss Pearce’s case, this system had an added benefit. He could not lead her—or himself—further into temptation if they were never in the same room together. He just had to get through the next fifteen minutes with her. Alone. In the dark. With her tart-sweet scent teasing his nostrils and the soft, warm curves of her arm and leg pressed along the right side of his body. Gods, but it would be easy to succumb...

To his paradoxical disappointment, she sighed and bobbed her head in agreement. "That would be the wisest course of action."

Except he didn't want to be wise. His only consolation was that she didn't sound particularly thrilled to be wise, either.

They sat in silence for several minutes as the hackney jostled through the busy streets. Would one more kiss really be such a bad idea? Maybe the first had only been so exciting because they had both been aware of the danger of discovery. The second might well dim by comparison, and surely that would make the necessity of going their separate ways easier.

*No, of course, it would be a bad idea.*

He needed a topic of conversation to occupy his mind and pass the time before he did something incredibly foolish. "I shall have to find another printer now, I suppose," he finally said into the pulsing silence.

"Do you have anyone in mind?" she asked.

"Rickert will likely recommend someone. That is how I came to him when my last printer had to cut me loose."

The hackney jolted as the driver failed to avoid a rut, and Miss Pearce was suddenly halfway across his lap. Longing swelled—literally—in his loins before she righted herself and settled back on the seat.

*Keep the conversation going, man. It's your only hope.* "So, how did you go from writing children's stories to political essays? Mary Weather and Polly Dicax seem worlds apart."

"Have you read any of the Mary Weather books?" Her tone was arch.

"Actually, I haven't," he admitted. "But I know they were very popular. For several years, I couldn't pass a bookshop window without seeing a display of them. They looked quite charming."

She laughed drily. "Yes, they did. But we did that purposely, to make them *look* harmless. Those stories are every bit as subversive and biting as anything I've written as Polly Dicax; people just think they're sweet and wholesome because they are about animals

instead of humans and are adorably illustrated. Catching flies with honey instead of vinegar, you know.”

“In that case, I cannot understand why you gave up writing those books in favor of incendiary social commentaries that can only be published in dissident newspapers. Especially when those books were so successful. Writing for publishers like me must be quite a step down in terms of income.”

She shrugged. “You would think so, but I had to split the earnings from the Mary Weather books with my cousin, Annabelle, who illustrated them, and she deserved every farthing and more because her drawings were what sold them. But the truth is that I got tired of writing for children and of having to conceal my opinions beneath a sugary shell. I much prefer the direct approach, even if it makes me less money and alienates some readers.” Miss Pearce sighed and added, “I do wonder if anything I write makes any difference at all, though. The world does not seem to be getting appreciably kinder or fairer despite my efforts.”

Lucas let out his own sigh in commiseration. “It does seem a rather pointless undertaking at times, doesn’t it? But if it is any consolation, I once believed I could make the world a better place by practicing law, only to discover that justice and the law have very little relationship to one another. On the whole, I’ve found writing to be considerably more gratifying and possibly more effective.”

Although not more lucrative. It occurred to him that if he had become a barrister as he had originally planned, the chasm between their social stations would be considerably reduced. Especially had he been as successful as the man to whom he had been apprenticed. If he were a barrister earning several hundred pounds a year instead of a writer and publisher of an illegal periodical who scraped by on thirty shillings a week and lived under the constant threat of arrest and prosecution, there might be future for him and Miss Pearce. Though he rather suspected that even then, her parents would not embrace a man of his birth and blood as a son-in-law. No, it was

foolish to even consider the possibility.

“I should have known you had studied law. Your essays on legal matters are always so detailed and erudite. I suppose you also write all of the articles covering important cases and trials that have come before the courts, though you don’t put your name on them.”

“Guilty as charged,” he admitted, but he warmed at the compliment. “I even sell some of those articles to the more respectable dailies, since they are often hardly newsworthy by the time the *Disciple* comes out.”

“Then I suppose you will not be overly disappointed to learn that I too write for the occasional reputable publication.” In the dim illumination from a passing street lamp, he could make out the wry twitch of her lips. Her very kissable lips. “Though not as Polly Dicax, of course. None of them would never print the ‘scurrilous nonsense’ she writes.”

The hackney drew to a halt and a glance out the window told Lucas they had reached the intersection of Drury Lane and Oxford Street, which put them within a few minutes of arriving at his address. To his annoyance, he discovered he now wished the ride did not have to end so soon.

As the vehicle lurched into motion again and turned left, Miss Pearce said softly, “I wish we had more time together.” Likely, she had also recognized their location and how close they were to parting. Forever.

Before he was aware of what he was doing, he had reached for and taken her hand in his. Her fingers were warm and very soft. Like the rest of her. He wished... Gods, he wished a thousand things. “I would court you, you know, if things were different.” If she were an entirely different person. Or if he were. And in any case, he had no business courting any woman when he was an outlaw and constantly on the brink of arrest and imprisonment, let alone marrying.

Shaking her head, she interleaved her fingers with his. “Then I am rather glad things are not different, for I would have to reject



your suit under any circumstances.”

He frowned. “Are you promised elsewhere? Or soon to be?”

“Heavens, no! It is only that I would sooner wind up in a poorhouse than get married. At least there, a woman can be assured that the fruits of her labor will be rewarded with a roof over her head and food on the table. If she marries, she can earn as much through her efforts as Croesus himself and still go homeless and hungry if her husband is a spendthrift.”

This observation was completely accurate from the point of view of the law, and he should have anticipated her attitude toward marriage. Polly Dicast had written a number of editorials excoriating the legal fiction that treated husband and wife as one person while bestowing all the power on the man. Lucas himself had witnessed and decried the harmful effects of this particular facet of English jurisprudence, for many women and their children lived in squalor because their husbands drank their wages and, if the woman tried to earn her own income to better the family’s lot, that money too belonged to her husband and went down his gullet just as rapidly.

Surely this could hardly be considered a problem amongst the upper classes, though. Men with incomes of hundreds or even thousands of pounds a year might squander fortunes at the gambling tables or on other vices, but they were unlikely to be so bankrupt that they could not afford the basic necessities. A lady like Miss Peace who married a propertied gentleman could be all but assured of a comfortable life with no need to earn an income at all, much less that her husband would pilfer her pockets for extra coin.

And Miss Pearce was far too vibrant and responsive for him to imagine that she would be happy living out her days without the emotional and physical companionship of a partner.

“But there is more to life than financial security,” he objected. “What about love? What about passion?”

A gust of wry laughter escaped her. “Until today, Mr. Delgado, I would have told you that such things did not interest me.”

She shifted on the narrow seat so she was more or less facing him and reached up with one hand to cup his jaw. With her thumb, she stroked his beard from just below his cheek to the indentation between his lower lip and his chin. It was all he could do to suppress the groan of longing that threatened to erupt from his throat.

“Until you,” she whispered, leaning closer, her sweet breath fanning his cheek. He bent his head toward hers, their lips inches apart. Almost...

The hackney slowed and began pull to the side of the road. They had reached his lodgings. With a frown, she settled back against the seat back.

The interlude was over, and with it, his last opportunity to kiss her. He would never see her again.

## Chapter Five

❧

*“The stamp duty is naught but a tax on knowledge which exists solely to prevent the enlightenment and empowerment of the working classes. Breaking the law is preferable to making information too costly for the average man to afford.” – Luke Evangelista*

“What is troubling you, my brother?”

Lucas looked up from his empty coffee cup with a guilty start. Rahul Joshi, Lucas’s best friend for better than fifteen years, peered across the table over the rim of his own cup, from which a plume of steam still rose. Rahul must have poured himself another helping from the pot while Lucas had been gathering wool.

The two of them met every Wednesday morning without fail at this café near Russell Square. They’d begun the tradition several years earlier, when Rahul had taken his current position as an accounting clerk with William Cubitt & Co., the contractor responsible for building the newly completed Covent Garden Market hall. They’d chosen the café for its location, equidistant between Rahul’s offices on Grays Inn Road and Lucas’s lodgings, but as luck would have it, the proprietress brewed some of the best coffee in all London.

Lucas frowned, trying to decide how much of his current ennui to share with his friend. Rahul would never reveal the details to another soul—not even to Magdalene, the opera singer with whom he was currently living in sin—but Lucas hadn’t intended to think about *her* at all, let alone talk about her. He had, in fact, been

determined to put her out of his mind from the moment he'd cracked open his 1822 copy of *Debrett's Peerage* and discovered her true identity.

And if intentions were horses, beggars would ride.

Because he hadn't been able to stop going over and over his memories of yesterday's events. The moment Rickert had shoved the two of them into the hidey-hole and shut the door. The instant her scent had reached his nostrils and he'd realized she was no messenger boy. The plush softness of her lips and the sweet-tart flavor of her mouth on his tongue. The click of connection, of recognition, of *rightness*.

The rightness, of course, was a lie. There could not be a less suitable woman on earth for the likes of Lucas Delgado Guerrero.

"Ah," Rahul said into the silence, which had already stretched a little too long. "A woman."

This was the problem with lifelong chums, Lucas thought with some irritation. There was no hiding anything from the rascals. "A Lady," he corrected, placing enough emphasis on the last word to imply the capital letter.

His friend waggled his eyebrows. "I thought you were off aristocrats these days."

Lucas glowered at the double entendre. "I am. But it's not like that. *She* isn't like that."

Rahul's eyes rolled heavenward, and he emitted a snort. "That's what you said the last time."

Was it? Lucas did not recall having said any such thing about the last lady who'd graced his bed—or, more accurately, whose bed he had *disgraced*. But then, it had been nearly four years ago. He had likely forgot a great many things he's said and felt about that particular woman. Lady Anne May had been the wife of the man whose acquittal had convinced Lucas he could not practice law and live with himself. Also, she had played him like a well-tuned pianoforte, convincing him her marriage was a loveless farce while subtly pumping him for information about the case against her

husband. It was unlikely that anything she'd gleaned from Lucas had affected the outcome of the trial—the fact that the defendant was both rich and titled had sealed the verdict before the jury had even been seated—but the alacrity with which she had booted him from her bed once the judgment had been handed down had been... illuminating.

Gods, he'd been such a fool.

Nonetheless, he felt compelled to point out that, in this case, the lady *was* different, and so he blurted out the whole story, though of course he omitted the more intimate details. He also withheld both her pen name and her real name from the account, not that it did any good on the first score.

Rahul let out a low whistle. "Are you telling me Polly Dicax is a nob?"

Lucas should have expected it. His friend read *The Weekly Disciple* as well as numerous other similar publications religiously, after all.

But at least he could keep Rahul from learning the rest. From finding out, as Lucas had last night, that the woman he'd had the misfortune to discover was otherwise his perfect match was not only a member of the aristocracy, but the daughter of an earl, the niece of a viscount, and the niece of a respected diplomat in the Foreign Office with whom Lucas's own father routinely worked.

Lady Honora Amelia Francesca Langston Pearce was as inaccessible to a man of Lucas's means and station as the surface of the moon to the boots of humanity. If she had been a widow or unhappily married after producing the requisite heir and spare, she might consider a man like him for a few tumbles in the proverbial hay, but never for anything deeper or more permanent. But given that she had committed herself to spinsterhood, even a brief dalliance would be out of the question.

"She is," he confirmed for Rahul's benefit.

"So for all her talk of reform and equality, she's really just another greedy swell. That's disappointing, I must say."

Since Lucas's reaction upon locating her name in *Debrett's* had been much the same as his friend's, he probably should not have felt a surge of righteous indignation on her behalf at the insult. But he had since taken the time to review their interactions—in the most meticulous mental detail—and to reread a large number of her essays, and he had come to the conclusion that she was completely sincere in the beliefs she espoused in her work. “You are holding against her the very thing the British nobility hold against us and every other member of the working class: the accident of her birth,” he observed. “When did you become so narrow-minded?”

“My God, you truly are smitten.” Rahul shook his head sadly. “If she is as genuine in her beliefs as you claim, then the accident of *your* birth should be no impediment. Yet she does not welcome your suit.”

“I explained that she does not intend to marry.”

His friend's eyebrow arched in the way that made him look particularly patronizing. “Surely you don't just accept that because it is what she told you.”

A ribbon of distrust slithered through Lucas's midsection. The assertion *would* be a convenient way to put him off without showing her true colors. But no, he decided. There was no way she had fabricated her objections to put him off.

“No, I do not accept it simply because she told me.” He mimicked Rahul's skeptical tone. “I accept it because she has argued for years that the legal status of married women is unjust and dangerous. Her personal position is completely in keeping with her public statements.” Not to mention that she was twenty-five, lovely, and still unwed. This did not suggest hypocrisy.

With a grudging sigh, Rahul nodded. “Very well. I've certainly read her essays on the subject and she is consistent, I will give her that. But *marriage*? You met her yesterday, and already you must either have her to wife or not have her at all? That seems rather... precipitous, don't you think?”

“What do you suggest as an alternative?” Lucas asked

caustically. “That I install her in my flat as my light-o’-love as you have Magdalene? I’m sure that would go over well.”

His friend rolled his eyes. “If I had your attitude, I would still be ogling my Maggie from the pit instead of holding her in my arms every night.” Rahul leaned forward, his expression earnest.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained; fortune favors the bold; et cetera, et cetera. You’ll spend the rest of your life wondering what might have been if you don’t go after her.”

“I can’t—”

Rahul held up his palm to halt the words. “You may not succeed. But you can *try*. I’ve never known you to shy away from an obstacle. Why are you so willing to give up on this woman before you’ve even begun?”

Because the stakes were too high. And not simply because he’d be a fool to marry anyone, given the illegality of his chosen occupation, but because rejection would wreck him. Easier to live with regrets than with confirmation that he would never be smart enough, rich enough, *good* enough for her. He’d learned not to expect too much from the British—be they rich and titled or poor and common—when it came to the color of his skin and the foreignness of his accent. And no one should understand that better than Rahul.

Lucas remembered the day the two of them had met in the yard at St Paul’s School. Both of them scrawny, dark-skinned thirteen-year-olds, they drew attention to themselves simply by existing. The abuse from their English classmates had begun almost immediately and had escalated from taunts to physical violence when it had become clear the two “mud boys” were the academic superiors of their native-born peers. Rahul had excelled at mathematics to such an extent that the headmaster had been forced to place him in the fifth form, while Lucas’s command of the written word had been good enough to keep him at the top of their class for the next five years. But not only had this failed to earn them accolades from their fellow students, it had not even won them praise from their

instructors who, rather than rewarding their accomplishments, would scold the other pupils for being too lazy or too feckless to outstrip the performance of “low-born foreign savages.”

It had been natural, under the circumstances, for Rahul and Lucas to band together for both moral and physical support, but the friendship had deepened into blood brotherhood. No one on earth understood Lucas better than Rahul, not even Lucas’s own parents, and he would have said the same was true in the reverse...or had been, until Magdalene had come into his friend’s life. And perhaps she was the reason Rahul had forgotten what they’d both learnt in St. Paul’s schoolyard: they would never, ever be as good as even the lowest Englishman. For as downtrodden and abused as the poorest British citizen might be, he was still white and therefore superior to an Indian of either the Mexican or Asian variety.

“When are you going to marry her, then?” Lucas heard himself ask.

Rahul’s brown eyes shuttered, and he sighed. “Maggie wants to marry this summer. She has a beautiful voice, but she will never escape the chorus and she knows it. Now that my position with Cubitt seems secure, she wants to quit the opera, stay home, and have babies.”

“And you don’t want that?”

“There is nothing I would love more!” Rahul nearly shouted. When conversation at several other nearby tables went silent and heads swiveled, he flushed and lowered his voice. “You know my parents. They are still determined to arrange a marriage for me with a good Marathi girl from home. I’ve been putting them off for years, telling them my career and income were too unstable for me to consider taking a wife. Can you imagine their reaction if I brought Maggie—not just a Christian and an English girl but an *opera singer*—home and told them I plan to marry her?”

Lucas stifled a laugh that would have been more sympathy than amusement, but which he knew his friend might not recognize as such. The Joshis were among the kindest, most welcoming people



he knew, but they were strictly faithful to the traditions and beliefs of their homeland and had little patience for their son's more relaxed attitudes and sensibilities. They would view his desire to marry any Englishwoman as a slap in the face; the fact that she was the sort of woman even English parents would reject as a daughter-in-law only made the insult more grievous.

Grinning wryly, Lucas observed, "Under the circumstances, you're a fine one to be handing out romantic advice. Or is it just that you'd like to see me in as devilish a predicament as you are?"

Rahul grinned back. "Misery loves company." His expression sobered. "But so does joy. I would like to see you as happy and blessed in love as I have been, even if there are hardships along the way. After all, what is the value of a prize that comes cheaply or easily?" Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, he drew out his pocket watch and flipped it open. "And my time is up." He drained the last of the liquid from his cup, rose to his feet, and clapped a hand on Lucas's shoulder. "I'll expect an update next week, my friend."

As he watched his friend saunter from the coffee house, Lucas reflected that Rahul had a point, at least insofar as the only things worth having were the ones that came with trials and tribulations. But there was a difference between hard work and hopelessness, and Lucas could see no way in which any pursuit of Lady Honora Pearce could result in anything but heartbreak. He was already half in love with her; if he allowed himself the opportunity to tumble all the way, he would never be happy again. For even if she loved him in return, even if she wanted to spend the rest of her days with him, she had too much to lose to wed him.

Given these ruminations, he should not have taken the minibus from Russell Square to Poland Street. And he certainly should not have headed west on Poland Street instead of turning east toward home. But some impulse propelled him—a desire, perhaps, to see the veritable palace where she lived and once and for all dash the hope he foolishly continued to harbor.

He might also, he supposed, have been holding out for the

possibility that she would simply happen to be on her way out when he walked by. A chance meeting at which he could evince surprise and delight while not actually being so forward as to press his suit.

What happened when he reached the address he'd memorized the night before when she'd provided it to the hackney driver was something else entirely, however.

To begin with, the façade of the Earl of Ormondy's London residence was considerably less ostentatious than Lucas had anticipated. Instead of the shiny white veneer, sweeping staircase, and wide frontage he had imagined, 12 Clifford Street was a conventionally narrow terrace constructed of plain red brick and free of ornamentation, aside from a Grecian-styled pediment that shaded the front stoop. A townhome in the heart of Mayfair was still worth more than Lucas would earn in a hundred lifetimes, even if he returned to practicing law, but its relatively modest appearance did not give him the gut punch of unworthiness he'd been expecting. In fact, he had to fight the temptation to mount the steps and knock on the shiny black-paneled front door.

And then what? He had no calling card to present and no rational reason to present himself. Yet the urge had him taking several steps in that direction when a liveried coach drawn by four gray draft horses pulled to a stop at the curb in front of the Ormondy residence. The footman who rode in the back leapt to the pavement and opened the door to permit the occupants to exit. Lucas was expecting several people, all garbed in elegant splendor, to emerge, but instead, the only passenger appeared to be a man who towered almost comically over the footman, especially once he had set his top hat upon his head. At some twenty feet distant, Lucas could see that the gentleman—for he must be one to be ferried about in such a fine conveyance—was broad in the shoulders but slender through waist and hips, very handsome, and quite young.

Suspicion rocketed through Lucas's chest as the fellow walked to

the front door of number 12 and gave three sharp raps of the knocker. Was Rahul right? Had Lady Honora lied to him about her opposition to marriage? The door opened, and the caller was immediately ushered inside by an unseen servant. Clearly, he was a known quantity in Ormond's household, an intimate friend. Was this coxcomb her suitor? Or even her betrothed?

Lucas's stomach churned with emotion—anger, betrayal, grief. *Fool. Rattlepate. Nincompoop.* She had never been his to lose, but somehow, he had managed to convince himself there was a chance. Now he knew better. Even if he was jumping to conclusions—and he knew he *was* jumping to conclusions, for there was no evidence whatsoever that the tall, handsome, young gentleman was there to see Lady Honora, let alone courting her—*this* was why he could not afford to maintain the fantasy of any sort of future. Because he would always know she could have done better, should have better.

He pivoted on his heel and walked away. Some dreams were never meant to become reality.

## Chapter Six

36

*“The two of them lay on the grass, gasping and panting, as acrid smoke billowed from Hallsbury Hall, now fully engulfed in flames. The crash and clatter of glass as another window burst behind them caused Jones to hunch his shoulders to shield her from the flying shards. Why had she never noticed before, Persephone wondered, how very broad those shoulders were, or how very taut and shapely were the muscles of his nether limbs?”* – M. Honeywell

Honora reread the last paragraph she had written and sighed. This would never do, she thought irritably. The readers of M. Honeywell’s *The Adventures and Misadventures of Miss Persephone White* would not take kindly to their wholesome and plucky heroine musing over the bulge in Bow Street Runner Gabriel Jones’s breeches. Nor would they much care for her stalwart and perfectly proper protector suddenly demonstrating anything but a platonic interest in the lady’s person.

But that was what kept coming out on the page. All because she could not stop thinking about Mr. Delgado. About the kiss. About the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her belly and making her weak and melty inside.

With a frown, she lifted the paper from her desk, prefatory to balling it up and tossing it in the waste bin with the dozen or so others she’d already disposed of today, when a polite scratch on the door interrupted her.

“Come,” she called, expecting one of the housemaids to enter on some task or errand.

She was surprised, therefore, when Collins, the butler, appeared in the doorway. “Mr. Noel Langston to see you, milady,” he announced with great formality.

Honora was on her feet with a squeal of delight before Collins had even backed far enough from the door to allow her cousin to enter the private sitting room that adjoined her bedchamber. Owing to his prodigious height, Noel had to duck his head before crossing the threshold, which gave Honora time to cross the floor and leap into his arms once the butler had shut the door behind them.

“Noel,” she said as he lifted her from the floor and gave her a brotherly hug, “what a wonderful surprise!”

Noel was the youngest of the children her Uncle Walter and Aunt Artie had rescued from an orphanage run by two thoroughly nasty women who mistreated their charges and falsified records to collect more than they were due from the parish. Despite the fact that the family lived in a small town in Cumbria, where her uncle served as vicar, Honora was closer to Noel—and to Annabelle, who was nominally his sister—than to anyone else she knew. Partly, this was because Noel was a year younger than she, while Annabelle was a year older. The three of them had been inseparable during Christmas holidays in London and Easter and summer holidays in the country. But the other, more essential reason was that the three of them had been nonconformists from the cradle. They were none of them related by blood, despite the familial connection, but their bonds went far deeper than a mere accident of birth could account for. As they’d reached adulthood, however, they’d found fewer and fewer opportunities to spend time together.

After the publication of the last Mary Weather book three years past, Annabelle had embarked on a grand tour of the continent to study the masters and develop her craft as a painter. She had come back to England at the end of 1829, but left the following spring after securing an invitation to join the studio of Tommaso Minardi in Rome. Since then, she had not been home, and she was a woefully irregular correspondent.

As for Noel, he had been taking a more active interest in his mother's concerns—which was to say politics, not courtesantry—since graduating from Cambridge, and while this meant he often came to London, it also meant his time tended to be spoken for. She supposed she should have expected he might be in Town now, with election for the new Parliament beginning tomorrow, but that made it all the more startling that he should have found the opportunity to visit her. And in the middle of the day, no less.

When he had set her feet back on the floor, she stepped away and looked up at him. He had filled out a good deal since she'd seen him at Christmas, for his shoulders appeared wider than she remembered and his frock coat nipped tighter at the waist but flared broader across his hips. All in all, he made quite a handsome picture, though he lacked Mr. Delgado's rugged, earthy appeal.

And why in heaven's name should she think of *him* now? Scolding herself for her wayward thoughts, she gestured for her cousin to take up the armchair nearest the grate while she settled onto the settee diagonal to him. "I am delighted to see you, but I cannot imagine to what I owe the pleasure of your company."

Noel pressed his palm to his heart, feigning injury. "You cut me to the quick, cuz! Do I need a reason now to pay you a call?"

Rolling her eyes, Honora repressed a grin. "You have been in Town no less than three times since Christmas, but not once have you come to see me. I know my father and Uncle Nash and all your other contacts in government keep you fully engaged when you are here, and I do not begrudge them your time, but do give me the courtesy not to pretend you don't appreciate my surprise."

His mouth dimpled at one corner, and he sighed in capitulation. "Alas, I do, and I regret that I have made a stranger of myself, but you know how tumultuous everything has been for the past few months. And now we must ensure a liberal majority in these elections, or we'll never get the Reform Bill passed."

Ever since the Wellington government's fall last November in the wake of the Swing Riots, Earl Grey and his allies—including her

father and Uncle Nash—had been working without success to pass legislation reforming the electoral system. The shortcomings of the present system had been evident for decades if not centuries, for the current apportionment of seats in the Commons had led to numerous rotten or pocket boroughs that gave far too much power to their representatives relative to the size of the population. And then there was the question of the franchise, and who should have it. Grey and the Whigs wanted to expand the right to vote beyond those who owned property worth forty or more shillings—though their proposal didn't go nearly far enough in Honora's opinion—while Wellington and the Tories were divided on whether to make any changes at all.

In any event, the bitter and tumultuous struggle between the factions had ended five days ago, when the King had appeared in person to dissolve Parliament. Honora had written several articles about the events of that singular day for various publications, leaning rather shamelessly on her father's descriptions at the dinner table that evening for details. And now, elections for a new seating would begin in some constituencies as early as tomorrow and carry on through the end of May.

"Given my professional pursuits, you must be aware you're not telling me anything I don't already know," she chided. He and Annabelle were the only people who knew she was Polly Dicax as well as Mary Weather and M. Honeywell. Although, she supposed Mr. Delgado knew now, too—though not about M. Honeywell, author of thrilling yet chaste serials.

Or they had been chaste until today.

"And this is all the more reason I wonder that you are able to come see me at all," she went on. "You must have many duties a great deal more pressing than paying an unplanned visit to your cousin." Leaning forward, she fixed him with a shrewd stare. "So, to what errand do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

Noel's chuckle was self-deprecating. "I should have known you wouldn't believe I'd just come by for an idle chat. Though the truth

is, it's not much more than that." He reached inside his frock coat and extracted a folded square of paper from the inner breast pocket. "This," he said, handing the paper to her, "is a letter to you from Annabelle. She included it in her most recent letter and asked that I pass it on to you at my earliest opportunity, which happens to be today."

Honora accepted the missive with a frown of puzzlement and concern. "Why would she not just send it to me directly?"

Her cousin relaxed into his chair, a gesture that made the dainty proportions of the furniture appear almost comically Lilliputian, for Noel's shoulders rested where the seatback was designed to support the head of its occupant, causing him to hunch slightly to fit within the narrow dimensions. "I haven't read it, so I can't say with absolute certainty, but I suspect she wanted to ensure its contents were not inadvertently disclosed to anyone other than you. Since I have my own residence, mine was the only address to which she felt she could send her correspondence without the risk of prying eyes."

"But why on earth should she be worried in the first place, Noel?" Honora demanded, trying to imagine what news could be so dire that Annabelle would fear it being revealed to other members of the family. The only explanations she could envision were so dreadful as to be unthinkable, but Noel's tranquil disposition did not suggest anything serious could be amiss. And while Annabelle might wish to write Honora separately from her brother, there was no possibility whatsoever that she would not have disclosed any awful news to him as well.

Noel's blue eyes twinkled with merriment, providing proof positive that nothing could be very wrong. "It seems that our Annabelle is quite madly in love."

Honora could not have been more surprised to hear that her cousin had decided to paint herself blue and invade London with a horde of Icenian warriors. In point of fact, she would find that somewhat less improbable.



Cocking her head, she narrowed a suspicious gaze on Noel. “Are you sure we are talking about the same person? The Annabelle who said she could never conceive a passion for any man when art exists?”

“Well,” he said with a grin and a shrug of his too-broad-for-the-chair shoulders, “that is the thing. She has not fallen in love with a *man*.”

It took several seconds for the implication of these last words to sink in. Annabelle had always been in love with art—and that was, in any case, hardly controversial—so if she had not fallen in love with a man, then... Honora’s eyes widened. “You mean she is in love with a *woman*?”

Noel cocked his fingers at her in the shape of a gun. “Got it in one.”

Annabelle was in love with a woman. Well, that was something, wasn’t it? And explained her cousin’s desire for secrecy.

Honora turned the letter over in her hand, considering the flowing script in which her name had been written upon it. The more she considered the idea, however, the more it made sense.

Growing up, Honora had always assumed she would one day fall in love with a man and marry him. She had conceived a tendré for any number of boys, including a brief infatuation with Noel and Annabelle’s older brother, Benjamin, whom she regarded until this very day to be the most beautiful male person of her acquaintance. It was only when she had been in the process of considering actual suitors as potential husbands that she had decided love and marriage were not for her. But if she had met Mr. Delgado back then—before she had come to understand the legal implications of the wedded state for a woman—she might have come to a very different conclusion.

But Annabelle had never fancied male persons at all. And while she’d claimed this was because art had her whole heart, Honora recalled that her cousin’s eyes had often followed the prettiest girl in any room, and that when she chose human subjects to draw or

paint, Annabelle favored girls and women as her models. Moreover, she always depicted them with a stunning combination of fidelity and romanticism so the resulting image flattered the subject while managing never to seem a work of fantasy.

Her cousin had *always* loved women. Of course she had. It was obvious, but Honora had been blind to it simply because the possibility hadn't occurred to her.

"Do your parents know?" she asked, not so much with regard to the particulars of Annabelle's current *affaire d'amour* as to her longstanding inclinations.

He shrugged. "I suspect they suspect. Especially Mama. But Annabelle has not told them; that much is clear from the letter she wrote me."

"And that is why she did not want to send her letter to me here. She feared one of my parents—or worse yet, one of my brothers—might get hold of it." Honora shook her head. Poor Annabelle! What must it be like to be in love and be unable to share that joy with the rest of the world?

But Honora had an inkling, hadn't she? Because she was beset by a similar dilemma. Perhaps she could not *quite* claim she was in love with Mr. Delgado, but her feelings went far beyond mere infatuation. He'd kindled something deep and essential in her, and now the ember smoldered at the core of her being, refusing to be extinguished.

She would never be satisfied. For unlike Annabelle, who had miles and miles of land and ocean between her and anyone who might disapprove of her desires or the object of them, Honora was trapped in the heart of London, under the watchful eyes of her family. Of society. No matter how she might rail against the rules that bound her, she must marry or burn. Those were the only choices.

"I met a man yesterday." The words were out of her mouth before she even registered the intention of speaking them.

Noel knew her too well not to pick up the implication. "I see,"

was all he said.

The rest of the story came tumbling out then. Her reasons for visiting the printer's shop. The police raid and being shut away in the dark with the man she already admired as a journalist and essayist. She even told him of the kiss, though she did not describe this in detail, for she could scarcely tell her male cousin how that simple meeting of mouths had made her nipples stiff and tingly, and had sent white-hot sparks of pleasure through her limbs, and had caused the flesh between her legs to become wet and heavy with desire. And finally, their resolution never to see one another again.

When she reached the end of her tale, she gestured toward the waste bin, overflowing with discarded papers. "I can't write. I can scarcely think of anything but him. And I don't know what to do."

Her cousin, who had listened to her rambling account, his expression sympathetic and without judgment, shook his head in gentle reproof. "If you are hoping for advice, you will find me an abysmal source. I have less experience in such matters than Annabelle."

That made Honora's eyebrows climb. Noel was twenty-four, very handsome—if not quite so implausibly good-looking as Benjamin—and possessed of his own property and a not-insubstantial annual income. A gentleman of his age, appearance, and means was expected, if not presumed, to have had several paramours. "You have never...?"

He gave her a pointed look. "How could I? The very thought that I might sire a child and worse, perhaps never even know it..." A visible shudder ran through his lanky frame. "No, I shall wait until I marry."

Honora leaned forward and placed her hand over his in conciliation. "I beg your pardon," she said with the utmost sincerity. "I should have known how you would feel. But I have an entirely different problem when it comes to marriage, as you well know. And yet—"

"You want what you want," he finished for her.

“Exactly.”

Tilting his head, he studied her for a long, pensive moment.

“Can I ask you a hypothetical question?”

She laughed. “Of course.”

“If you could marry without losing your legal status, would you consider marrying this man?”

What an absurd question! “But I *would* lose my status,” she pointed out. “What possible bearing can my answer have when there is no hope of the law changing? You might as well ask whether I would consider openly taking him as my paramour if I would not be ruined in every possible way by such an action.”

Noel crossed his arms over his chest. “Very well. Pretend I asked you that.”

For several beats, she could only blink at her cousin in blank astonishment. She had read Richard Carlile’s *Every Woman’s Book* after its publication in 1828. Her mother had gifted her the treatise despite—or perhaps because of, knowing her mother!—its scandalously radical positions on female sexual equality. Honora concurred with Carlile’s propositions vis-à-vis the cruelty and hypocrisy of preventing women from pursuing and expressing their passions, although she dismissed as ludicrous his contention that spinsters grew weak and languid after the age of twenty-and-five. Especially now that she *was* twenty-and-five.

But while a world in which women had all the rights and privileges of men might well be among her most fervent aspirations, that future was no closer at hand than one in which a wife’s income and property was not her husband’s to dispose of as he pleased. She could no more take Mr. Delgado as her lover without consequence than she could take him as her husband. But if she could...

Good heavens, the answer was so clear, it was almost embarrassing.

“Yes. To both questions.”

Noel nodded. “Then you are sacrificing a chance at something wonderful just because it can’t be perfect. That doesn’t seem wise to

me. Does it to you?"

Damnation, she almost wished she hadn't asked him for his advice. Because he was not wrong and yet, whichever imperfect choice she made, she had so much to lose. Her livelihood. Her independence. Her reputation.

*Her heart.*

But if Mr. Delgado was truly the man she believed him to be, she had so much more to gain. Moreover, were she to stay away as he had asked, she would never know what might be. What she needed was a reason to spend time with him. Some laudable purpose he would be loath to refuse his support. And the election, she realized with a start, provided her with the perfect cause and venture. One that, having conceived of it, she would be obliged to follow through on whether Mr. Delgado deigned to join her or not.

She knew now what she had to do.

Leaning forward, she said to her cousin, "I believe I am going to need your help."

## Chapter Seven

34

*“Have no truck with the truck system, but demand nothing less than cold, hard cash for your labor, men of Merthyr, for there can be no fair exchange when the man who sets the wages also sets all the prices.” – Luke Evangelista*

Lucas replaced his quill carefully in the ink well and rose from his chair. Somewhat to his surprise, the article he’d just written was one of his best.

In it, he decried the increasingly dire situation in Wales, where unemployed ironworkers were having their property seized to cover debts imposed upon them by the very employers who now refused to pay them. The article had set just the right balance, he felt, between compassion for the oppressed and rage against the oppressors, while also elucidating the blatant fraudulence of the truck system, under which the ironmongers had for decades paid their workers not in real coin, but in credit to be used in the company’s own stores. Granted, his London readers were unlikely to be moved to strike on behalf of the afflicted workers as he had exhorted in the final paragraph, for they had their own struggles and injustices to contend with, but he felt he had made a strong case nonetheless. Perhaps it would have some effect, especially if the piece were reprinted by newspapers in Wales or cities like Manchester or Newcastle.

His passion for the subject took him aback, however, because he’d not been able to put Lady Honora Pearce out of his mind. Not the scent of her. Not the swell of her breasts pressed against his

chest or the curve of her hip against his leg. And certainly not the pure pleasure of simply talking with her as though they were friends. As though they could be more than friends.

He supposed there were some parallels between his predicament and that of the Welsh workers he'd been writing about, though. Oh, certainly, he was not at the mercy of anything or anyone as devious or cruel as they, but it all came back to what the wealthy and privileged would allow the common man to have and do, didn't it? Lady Honora was out of his reach because, like the goods the Welsh ironworkers had purchased from the company stores, he would never be permitted to afford her. He would certainly never forget watching that gentleman draw up to her family's house in his expensive carriage and truly registering the immensity of the gulf that separated him from her. She would always be subject, in some sense, to repossession.

With a grimace of irritation, he removed his waistcoat, dropped to the one uncluttered patch of floor that he managed to keep clear, and began the series of exercises he always executed after completing a written piece. He found the routine helped him clear his mind and, combined with regular walks, kept him fit despite his relatively sedentary occupation. The fact that he was in considerable mental and emotional turmoil only served to make the activity that much more essential to his well-being. He was breaking into a light sheen of perspiration when there was a knock on the door.

Pausing with his arms extended and supporting his weight, he furrowed his brow in puzzlement. He wasn't expecting any visitors this morning, was he? He didn't think so, and his social calendar was not so full that he should have forgotten an appointment, but given his current preoccupations, he wasn't certain. With a mental shrug, he got to his feet and ran his fingers through his hair. If he had forgotten an engagement, he would apologize for being caught en deshabille, but it seemed more likely to be someone he had not invited, and in that case, they deserved what they got.

The knock sounded again, a trifle more insistent, just before he reached the door, so he pulled it open with rather more speed than usual...and came face to face with a vision straight from his fantasies. Lady Honora Pearce—for even though he had never seen her in female garb, he would have recognized her based solely on the squared line of her chin, the wide cut of her lips, and the stormy gray of her eyes—almost careened straight into his chest. She must have been leaning into the door when he'd yanked it open, and she took several stumbling steps toward him before righting herself with their noses barely inches apart.

Her eyes widened. Her nostrils flared. Her cheeks pinked.

Within a single heartbeat, he catalogued the remaining details of her appearance. The dress she wore was likely the height of fashion, made of India cotton dyed with stripes of tiny red roses and green leaves on a field of light brown fabric and sporting wide, puffy sleeves that looked as though they should have scarcely fit through the doorframe without catching. The waist of the gown was cinched with a dark green belt closed by a gold buckle that Lucas would be willing to bet was actually made of gold. A wide-brimmed bonnet, its color a shade or two paler than the roses on the dress and trimmed with green feathers, covered her head, but several brown ringlets peeped out over her forehead and temples, giving him his first real glimpse of the color of her hair.

She was beautiful.

And if he leaned forward, barely at all, he would be kissing her.

He took two hasty steps backward. "What are y—"

"I beg y—"

They both spoke at once. She laughed, smiled, and shook her head ruefully. He wanted to take back his retreat.

"After you," he said, mindful of the open door behind her. Best to keep it that way, probably.

The breath she exhaled was slightly ragged, and he remembered he was half-naked.

"I apologize for intruding like this," she blurted, "but I could not



think of any way to warn you in arrival of my advance.” Her blush deepened as the error in the order of her words registered on her. “That is, in advance of my arrival,” she corrected.

A pulse beat visibly in her throat, just below the ribbon that secured her bonnet. It was all he could not to lean forward and press his lips there. Steeling himself, he turned away from her and went to fetch his waistcoat while he tried to decide which of the questions crowding his brain to ask first.

Why was she here? They had agreed not to see one another again. What could have induced her to visit him in his lodgings? Alone. And how had she known which rooms were his?

Well, the answer to that last was obvious, he thought as he shoved his arms into the waistcoat. She must have asked his landlady, who occupied the ground-floor flat. Which meant Mrs. Durant knew he was entertaining a woman in his rooms. And not just any woman, but a *lady*, for between her clothing and her bearing, there could be no doubt as to her social class.

Damnation, this might become awkward. Mrs. Durant was not a busybody and seldom interfered in her lodgers’ personal affairs, but he could not imagine what possible motive she would ascribe to his receiving a visit from such an obviously cultured, wealthy, and *unchaperoned* young woman. He doubted the landlady would conclude that such a woman was his professional colleague. Nor, in fact, could he even be certain the call was a professional one.

He was threading the topmost button of the waistcoat through its hole and wondering whether he ought to fetch a jacket from the wardrobe, when Lady Honora spoke again.

“I know we said we would not see one another again, but—”

Her breath caught and her speech paused as he pivoted to face her again, his simple blue waistcoat now providing him at least one layer of respectability. Of protection. From the flicker of emotion that crossed her features, he felt certain she was well aware he was girding his loins, metaphorically speaking.

Lucas met and held her gaze. “But?” he prompted, trying to

sound stern and disapproving despite the way his blood sang with hope.

Her shoulders squared and she returned his severity measure for measure. "But I have a proposition for you."

His eyebrows rose.

"A *business* proposition," she clarified hurriedly. "Or perhaps one might say a charitable one, since I don't expect to earn any money from the venture. But I believe it's a worthwhile endeavor, and your assistance would be of immeasurable value to its success."

Well, hell. Was he relieved or disappointed? Certainly, he *should* be the first. The last thing he wanted was for her to have come in the hopes of advancing an intimate relationship between them. That way lay humiliation and heartbreak. And yet, if he was honest with himself, he would have to admit he yearned for that to be the reason she had come. Nor was he entirely convinced he would decline such an offer, were it to be made. So much for his principles!

Moreover, regardless of how he felt about the purpose of her call, he could not but be curious about her "venture."

"I suppose you had best come in and have a seat, then," he said, and wondered if the words, which should have sounded grudging, came across as rather more eager than he intended.

Stepping a trifle further into the room, she glanced at her surroundings with a bemused expression. A wave of mortification washed over him. While he was hardly indigent and could scarcely be said to live in squalor, his accommodations were modest in the extreme, and most of what should have functioned as a sitting room was taken up with the paraphernalia of his profession. Shelves lined every available wall and were stacked, often two-deep, with books. All of the tabletops and all of the chairs save the one he had so recently vacated were piled with teetering stacks of paper and periodicals. There was most assuredly no obvious place for her to sit.

"I apologize for the state of the place. I wasn't expecting

company.” Hastily, he gathered the pile that rested on the seat of the armchair closest to the door and set it on the floor in the clear space next to his desk. The unwieldy mound wobbled precariously.

“There’s no need to apologize,” she assured him as she settled into the chair and arranged her skirts. “I believe this is the most perfect place for a writer I have ever seen. Every resource one could possibly desire in a single room.” Her smile dazzled him and at the same time reminded him of everything that could not be. “In fact, I rather envy it.”

“That seems unlikely, Lady Honora.” He placed a heavy and bitter emphasis on her courtesy title and first name.

Her eyes widened. “How did you—?” She broke off and looked around the room again. “Never mind,” she said with a self-deprecating puff of laughter. “You found me in *Debrett’s*. You clearly have a copy.”

“The 1822 edition,” he confirmed. Gripping the desk chair by one of the horizontal slats in the seatback, he swung it around and placed it opposite the armchair she occupied. Once he had seated himself, he observed drily, “You are an extraordinarily well-connected woman.”

She emitted a sigh of resignation. “That is undeniably and regrettably true.”

“I would hardly call being the daughter of one of England’s richest and most powerful earls ‘regrettable.’ Your father is practically Grey’s right-hand man, and your uncle his left. The world is your oyster.”

Her lips compressed into a line, and she stared off into the distance behind him for several seconds. “Is it? I suppose it must seem so from the outside, and I can’t deny the benefits of wealth and privilege are significant. But because I am a woman, there is very little I can do with either of these advantages, at least not openly. *I* am never going to be a prime minister’s advisor and confidante. *I* will not ever have access to my family’s fortune to spend and invest as I see fit.” She met his eyes again, her expression

softening. "When you are female, Mr. Delgado, the world is never truly your oyster; you are the pearl trapped inside it. And I do not say that because I hope you will feel sorry for me. I say it because I am trying to find my way out."

But he did feel...well, not *sorry* for her, exactly, but sympathetic. He knew better than most people what it meant to be seen as *less*, simply because of who you were.

"Lucas," he said softly. At the quizzical arch of her brows, he added, "You may call me Lucas, if you would prefer."

"Oh." She smiled again, and his heart stuttered. "And you must call me Honora. Because I truly detest the honorific *Lady*. I haven't done a single thing to earn it, after all."

He nodded and rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. "Now, tell me about this business proposition, Honora."

## Chapter Eight

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*“When rich men decry suffrage for poor men on the grounds that the poor will vote not the good of the country, but to line their own pockets, they speak from personal experience.” – Luke Evangelista*

Lucas.

Very close to Luke, but Lucas suited him better. The longer version was more complex and more graceful, especially with the lilt of his accent applied to the syllables.

She would become Mrs. Lucas Delgado if she married him. Oh, she could choose to be styled Lady Honora Delgado, but she would not. She scarcely tolerated being Lady Honora Pearce, after all.

And why had that thought even occurred to her? She was getting soft in the head as well as the heart, if she was already making them Mr. and Mrs. in her imagination.

Honora realized Lucas was studying her expectantly, and for a tick of the clock, she couldn't remember what he had asked her or how she should respond.

Oh, yes, her proposition. Which was absolutely *not* a marital one.

She smoothed her skirts and launched into her explanation. “First of all, it occurred to me after we parted on Wednesday night that I know a printer who would probably be willing to take on *The Weekly Disciple*, especially if I make the referral. They are Lee & Roth in the Marylebone High Street. They have printed and distributed several editions of the Mary Weather books, but I happen to know that they print a number of the more radical

periodicals currently in circulation.”

“I see. But there is more to your visit than that, surely?”

She nodded. “Indeed. You see, I was discussing the elections with my cousin yesterday—he is down from Cumbria to consult with the Whig leadership on strategy—and I had the thought that I might be able to contribute in some small way to the cause of electing a Parliament committed to reform.”

A sardonic smile tipped the corners of his mouth. “I doubt *that* is possible.”

For a moment, she thought he was suggesting there was nothing useful she could do to affect the outcome of the election, but then took his real meaning. “Ha! Perhaps you are correct, but I mean a Parliament committed specifically to electoral reform. And as you have devoted more than a few drops of ink to the issue of underrepresentation of densely populated urban areas, the elimination of rotten boroughs, and the expansion of the franchise, I believe you have some interest in the cause.”

He shrugged. Honora tried not to notice the strain of his biceps against the fine white linen of his shirt...and failed utterly. No wonder a jacket was considered a necessity for proper dress in polite society. If she had been treated to the sight of barely concealed male arms as fine as his during her Season—

“I’m certainly in favor of reform,” he said, unaware of her salacious train of thought, “though the changes that have been proposed by the Whigs don’t go nearly far enough.”

The similarity of this sentiment to the one she had expressed the day before to her cousin regarding the state of marriage law was such that she could not help but snort. “So you would rather see no change at all than an improvement, simply because the improvement doesn’t go as far as you would like?”

Mr. Delgado—Lucas—leaned back far enough to tip the desk chair onto its two back legs and surveyed her through lowered lashes. “Well, I did not say that, did I? I’m just not sure what it is you think *I* can contribute, given the vast majority of the readers of

*The Weekly Disciple* aren't likely to be eligible to vote in this election, anyway."

This was, of course, perfectly true. The people who purchased radical newspapers were mostly either too poor or too female to have the franchise.

"Which is why my plan does not rely on reaching only the readers of publications like *The Weekly Disciple*," she told him, somewhat giddy at the prospect of revealing what she thought was a clever idea to someone whose opinion mattered to her. If he found it ill-conceived, she was going to be feel very foolish. Nonetheless, she soldiered forward before she could lose confidence. "What I propose is to print a series of leaflets—voter information guides, you might call them—and to distribute them free of charge. We would release one leaflet each week from now until the last Monday in May, with each edition providing coverage of the candidates in the boroughs that are holding elections in that week, along with essays promoting electoral reform and other worthy causes."

"We?" Lucas arched his eyebrows. "So you've already assumed my participation in this undertaking?"

Her heart sank, but she did her best to conceal her disappointment. "Are you refusing?"

Shrugging, he shook his head. "I haven't made up my mind yet. But I am curious how you propose to fund this scheme. If you print enough of these leaflets to get even a few of them into the hands of eligible voters, the taxes alone will run to fifty or sixty quid, to say nothing of the cost of the printing itself." With a self-deprecating smile, he gestured at their surroundings. "If you imagine from this that I have the blunt to make an investment, you've very much missed the mark as to the profitability of my publishing efforts thus far."

Although she had not been prevaricating in the slightest when she'd said she rather envied the convenience of having such an extensive library of books and periodicals immediately at hand,

rather than in an entirely different room in the house, she knew he probably hadn't believed her. After all, why should he? Not to mention that her covetousness was motivated primarily by what could only be described as bemoaning the crushing hardships of having money. She had every comfort and lived in the veritable lap of luxury, while he rented just two modest rooms with board in a somewhat dilapidated building in a risky part of Town. But she had never had any illusions as to the depth of his pockets; she was far more interested in the depth of his character...and in the sensual cut of his lips and the prickle of his beard against her cheek and the solid breadth of his chest pressing into—

And good heavens, *this* would never do.

With this stern self-remonstrance, she squeezed her thighs together to quell the ache and rushed on with her explanation. "My cousin and I will pay the taxes and production costs. In fact, his participation is partly why I said 'we' earlier. Noel and his mother, my Aunt Artie, are fierce advocates of radical causes—in fact, my own interest in politics was sparked as much by them as by my parents—and he believes these pamphlets might sway some voters to our side, and that makes them worth the cost. He'll also be able to provide information about the candidates in each of the boroughs, such as their voting histories and public statements on the Reform Act."

Lucas allowed his chair to drop back onto all four legs with a thud. "It sounds as though you have everything sorted. So what is it, exactly, that you think I have to contribute?"

It was all she could do to keep from rolling her eyes. His integral role in her plan—to say nothing of his inherent worth as an experienced editor and publisher—was so obvious to her that she could not believe he did not see it. "Why, all of this!" she said, gesturing around the room at the stacks of paper everywhere.

Within those piles she knew were the essays he had written on topics critical to the election, as well as a good many of her own, none of which she possessed. She did not make copies of her Polly



Dicax pieces for fear of having them discovered and her identity unmasked by her family. Those articles would form the backbone of each pamphlet, providing the rationale for electing a solidly liberal and reformist majority to the House of Commons for the first time in decades.


“Given the time frame, there is no way my cousin and I, by ourselves, could write enough material to fill the first pamphlet, or even the second, and indeed, it seems absurd for us to try when you have written or published dozens of articles on the subject that we could simply reprint. Everything we need—except, perhaps, the profiles of the candidates—is right here in this room, if only you will assist us.”

*And if you say no, this will be the end. We will never see each other again. We will never know what might have been.*

His expression had remained inscrutable throughout her plea. She folded her gloved hands in her lap and tried not to fidget while she awaited his response. She’d been so certain he would want to contribute to the effort that she had not seriously considered the possibility that he would refuse. But watching him now, she wondered whether she hadn’t overestimated the appeal of her proposal.

Just when she had begun to despair, he gave a curt nod. “I’m in. Where shall we begin?”

His abrupt acquiescence made her giddy with a combination of relief and exhilaration, which she was powerless to conceal. Grinning like a ninny, she gestured toward four neatly ranked stacks of newspapers she recognized as back issues of *The Weekly Disciple*. “I propose we start with a little light reading.”

he last of Lucas’s resistance crumbled in the face of her

smile. If he'd known how happy his acquiescence would make her, he wouldn't even have bothered to ask what she had in mind before agreeing. Because now that he knew how it felt to be responsible for her happiness, he doubted there was anything he could deny her. Not his heart. Not his body. He was hers to command for as long as his obedience gave her pleasure.

After that? Well, better not to contemplate that possibility.

Her face alight with elation, Honora reached beneath her throat and tugged at the loose end of the bow that held her bonnet in place. "I shan't be able to see well enough to read with this brim shadowing my eyes," she explained as she pulled the offending item from her head and then glanced around the room, no doubt in search of someplace to put it.

Lucas gestured toward the coat and hat rack to the left of the open door to the corridor. "You can hang it there," he suggested.

With another breathtaking smile, she rose in a rustle of hidden petticoats from her chair and strode to the rack. He noticed her gait was as firm and purposeful in all her finery as it had been when she dressed as an errand boy. The sway of her hips was only more noticeable because her skirts amplified the motion.

Now that her head was entirely exposed, he could see that her hair was not merely brown, but a mixture of shades ranging from dark gold to coppery cinnamon to rich chocolate. Its length, which he guessed would fall to somewhere between her shoulder blades if let loose, had been twisted into a knot at her crown, but the paler strands shone out from the darker ones like fireworks against a night sky. His mind painted an image of her hair loosed from its bonds and spread across his pillow, and his cock stretched and thickened enough to make his trousers strain.

So much for his high-minded principles, he thought sourly. He would tup her in a heartbeat if she but asked.

Once she had set the bonnet on a peg, she returned to her chair and turned her attention to her hands. Releasing the buttons on her left glove, she tugged at each fingertip, loosening them one at a

time before removing the garment. When she was done, she repeated the process on the other glove.

Somehow, this was the most erotic thing he had ever witnessed, and she seemed completely oblivious to the effect she was having on him. And after all, why should she expect him to break into a cold sweat at the sight of her doing something so innocuous?

Tucking the gloves into a pocket that hung from the belt around her waist, she looked back up at him expectantly and then gestured again—bare-handed—toward the four piles of newspaper that represented his archive of *The Weekly Disciple*. “I think we are most likely to find material we can reuse in the more recent editions. Which end is newer, the leftmost or right?”

He swallowed reflexively and gave himself a firm mental shake. Just because he suspected that she had conceived her “voter information guide” as an excuse to see him again, he was not so self-involved to believe that was the only possible explanation. Perhaps she truly *had* come simply to enlist his help and not as a way to spend more time with him. And either way, he would be a cad to treat her in anything less than a courtly manner.

Aware that he was still in possession of a noticeable bulge in his trousers, he deliberately turned away from her before rising from his chair. “They are organized from left to right, so yesterday’s issue is the topmost on the stack at the far right. The bottom of that stack is the first issue published this year, and the last issue of 1830 is on top of the pile to its left, and so on.”

“Let’s start with everything published since the beginning of this year and see where that gets us,” she suggested.

This seemed sensible, since many of the articles he had published and several he himself had written detailed the progress of the Reform Act since January, followed by its sudden demise and the dissolution of Parliament last week. He scooped up the first stack of broadsheets and set them on the seat of his chair, which he then picked up and placed directly beside hers. Heads bent together, they reviewed each back issue. They conferred, discussed,

debated.

Lucas could not recall that he had ever enjoyed anyone's company quite as much as he enjoyed hers. Not only because she was clever and insightful and funny. And certainly not just because he found her breathtakingly desirable; that was more of a torment than a pleasure. No, it was mostly because her companionship felt real and true. As if every barrier between them—class, wealth, sex—melted away into insignificance in the face of the *rightness* of their connection.

It was an illusion, of course. But for those two hours, Lucas reveled in pretending that one day, he might be hers.

## Chapter Nine

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*“The goal of any meaningful democratic reform must be universal suffrage for all adults, and not just regardless of income or sex, but even regardless of nationality; for any person who lives within the borders of a country is surely as bound by its laws and as subject to its taxes as its citizenry and thus these inhabitants too deserve a voice in how they shall be governed.” – Polly Dicax*

Honora buttoned her right glove and then held out her hand to accept the canvas bag that contained the articles she and Lucas had selected for republication in this week’s leaflet. “Thank you for agreeing to help me with this. I couldn’t do it without you.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Lucas responded easily. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” He slid the handle of the bag over her arm, and her skin prickled with awareness as his fingers brushed the bare skin just above her wrist. “And you definitely have the will.”

The playful tone of his voice invited an equally teasing response. “Am I meant to take that as an insult or a compliment?”

“Oh, it is most definitely a compliment.” His voice dropped half an octave, and his hand lingered an inch or two over her arm. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought he might kiss her and caught herself leaning toward him, face uplifted, in silent invitation.

A vain hope, not to mention a foolish one, since they currently stood in front of the open door between the sitting room and the corridor. At Lucas’s insistence, they had kept the door open for the duration of her visit. When Honora had protested that she had no concerns about her reputation, he had chuckled and said he had to

think of his own, particularly when it came to remaining in his landlady's good graces. After taking such pains to observe propriety for nearly two hours, he would hardly be so reckless as to take her in an ardent embrace now.

But that didn't stop her wishing that he would or her insides from tightening in expectation of an event that wouldn't happen.

At long last, he drew back, a frown flitting across his lips and creasing the corners of his eyes. "Before you go, may I ask you a question?"

"I believe you just did," she pointed out with a smile. "But yes, of course, you may."

The corners of his mouth deepened with amusement. "Fair, but what I want to know is... That is, I wonder whether—" He broke off and shook his head, obviously irritated with his inability to formulate the question to his satisfaction. "Damn it," he muttered, more to himself than her, and then heaved a sigh and continued. "The truth is, I suppose I have a confession to make."

Her heart clutched at the words. They sounded so ominous and yet so encouraging. She nodded, on a knife's edge of anticipation.

"In spite of what I said about it being better if we never saw each other again, I couldn't stay away. Yesterday, I went to your neighborhood and stood on the pavement outside your house. I told myself I was doing it to remind myself of why we cannot be together, but in the end, I know better. I went because I hoped to see you. Except, of course, that I could not think of a single justification for paying you a call. Instead, I stood there and watched a well-dressed young man get out of an expensive coach-and-four, walk up to your door, and gain admittance, and I envied him beyond reason. I even imagined he might be your suitor or your betrothed, and I hated him." He paused, his jaw clenched, his dark eyes swimming with raw emotion.

The bottom had fallen out of her stomach. He had been there, just yesterday, when Noel had arrived, wanting to see her. If she had known...

If she had known, she'd have done nothing. Because she could hardly invite a stranger into her family's home without an explanation, and there was no explanation she could have given that would not have resulted in even more questions. Mr. Lucas Delgado was not the publisher of any periodical her parents knew she wrote for; Luke Evangelista was the publisher of a newspaper her father would consider dangerous and subversive. Neither version of the man could reasonably call upon the daughter of the Earl of Ormondy without prior introduction.

She wished she could apologize, could reassure him somehow that she would have welcomed him into her family's home, but that would be a lie. How had she never truly seen it before? She'd believed that because her parents were both loving and unconventional in their attitudes, she could live beneath their roof and still have her independence. But that wasn't true at all. Her choices were circumscribed by her reluctance to openly do anything that would disappoint or wound her family. All of her freedoms were nothing but meaningless little rebellions that she either concealed or denied.

Her chest aching, she said instead, "That was my cousin."

Lucas waved his hand. "That doesn't matter now. I told you this because ever since you arrived, I've been wondering whether you called on me today for purely professional reasons or if you, like me, just couldn't stay away. Did you come for this?" he asked, tugging at the handle of the bag looped over the crook of her arm. "Or did you come for me?" he finished, stepping so close to her body that she could feel the heat radiating from his big, muscular body.

Her pulse roared in her ears. This shouldn't be happening. Not yet. She had meant to tell him later, once they had spent more time together and she was sure of what she wanted, that she had dreamed up the voter information guide as an excuse to circumvent his request that they never see each other again.

But it was happening now, and she would either have to admit

to her perfidy now or lose the very opportunity she had been trying to create.

“For you,” she whispered, her throat dry, her mouth full of parchment. “All of it was for you.”

“Thank the gods,” Lucas muttered. “I don’t know if I could have borne being alone in this.” He grasped her chin between his thumb and index finger, tilting her head back so he could look more directly into her eyes. “It’s madness to want you like this, but I cannot seem to stop myself.”

Heedless of the open doorway and the possibility of passersby, she pressed her palms against his chest, reveling in the supple yet solid feel of the muscles concealed beneath shirt and waistcoat. Everything below her waist turned warm and soft and...hungry. “If you are mad, then so am I.”

Taking her hands in his, he stepped backward, breaking the contact between them. She made a sound of protest, and he gave her a rueful shake of his head. “I have no wish to hide my feelings, but neither am I anxious to risk being thrown out of my lodgings.” He brought one of her hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to it. “Also, you have set yourself a large task to accomplish today. Or do you mean to abandon your plans now?”

*Oh, yes.* There was the blasted voter information guide. Which she would have to deliver to the printer before midafternoon tomorrow to have it ready for distribution on Monday.

Why hadn’t she dreamed up a project with a less aggressive deadline? Because drat it all, she had dragged Noel into this and she did care about the outcome of the election. And so, she thought, did Lucas.

“No, of course not,” she said gloomily, the conflagration in her midsection ebbing to a low, persistent glow. Slipping her hands from his, she stiffened her spine and put on a resolute smile. “Will you meet me at Lee & Roth tomorrow around two o’clock?”

His expression went briefly blank and then cleared. “To discuss having them print *The Weekly Disciple*.”



She nodded. "They will want a proper introduction. And afterward, we can..." Her voice trailed off as her mind served up graphic—though not precisely visual—images of what they could do. Of kisses and caresses, of Lucas touching her breasts and... well...other parts of her body, of her releasing the thick, hard shaft from his trousers and stroking it. What would that part of him feel like in her hand? What would that member feel like *inside* her? She flushed hotly at the direction of her thoughts and finished the sentence weakly with, "...spend time together."

"Yes." His low, rough voice was suffused with promise and made her shiver. "We can spend time together."

Lucas watched her departure until the feathers that bobbed atop her bonnet disappeared below the stairs before he retreated into his flat.

He truly was mad with wanting her. That was the only explanation for his willingness to throw both caution and conviction to the wind for the chance to have her, however briefly, in his arms. In his bed.

Hell and damnation, *his* bed. His lips twisted with scorn at the thought of the narrow frame topped with a straw-stuffed tick mattress on which he slept. The pallet was scarcely large enough to accommodate him, let alone two people engaged in any sort of amorous activity, and could hardly be described as comfortable. Honora would likely take one look at what passed for his bed and flee in horror. And he would not blame her.

Then again, he had no right to imagine her in bed with him at all—any bed. Yes, she desired him and wanted to explore the physical dimension of that attraction, but it did not follow that an unmarried lady who was unquestionably a virgin meant to spread

her legs for him at the very first opportunity. On the contrary, she might not ever welcome a true consummation, especially if she never meant to marry, and he would not take anything that was not on offer.

That still left a lot of room for pleasure, however. For both of them.

If she but took him in her smooth, elegant hand, he would spend. And if she took him in her mouth...

With a muffled curse, he grabbed one of the linen towels he kept near the grate, popped open the fall of his trousers, and extracted his swollen cock. Closing his eyes, he encircled the shaft with his thumb and forefinger and began to stroke the aching member. He imagined at first that his hand was Honora's hand, and then, as the pressure in his loins neared the crest, that his hand was her mouth. He visualized her kneeling in front of him and sucking him, her head bobbing in and out, her hair tumbling round her shoulders, her storm-gray eyes wild with passion. The image was crude and indecent and so vivid, he could almost believe she was really there, sucking his cock between the pretty pink pillows of her lips.

His climax took him so suddenly and so sharply that he overshot the towel, his seed spurting onto the bare floorboards before he could reposition the cloth to catch the rest. When he'd finished, he collapsed into the chair Honora had vacated only minutes before, finding it still slightly warm and smelling of her orange-and-honey perfume.

He closed his eyes and let out a low, scornful laugh. It had taken him less than three minutes to bring himself to completion just *imagining* her sucking him off. Probably, he ought not allow her to touch him at all if he didn't want to shame himself.

Gods, but he felt as unprepared for their assignation as if he were a virgin himself. The mechanics of the act might be familiar to him, but he had never experienced anything like this voracious, insatiable need for a woman. Physical arousal he understood; it was something he felt easily enough but could also ignore if he chose.

Indeed, he found celibacy considerably less taxing than engaging in meaningless, temporary liaisons.

But this was different. Not just desire, but a bone-deep compulsion to *know* her in every way, to make manifest the intellectual and emotional connection that had existed between them even before they had met in the flesh. That was the only explanation for the kiss in Rickert's hidey-hole. Nature had required it in the same way it required objects to fall. And who was he, a mere man, to resist what the universe had ordained?

Besides, the problem wasn't the fall itself, but the sudden stop at the bottom.

## Chapter Ten

10

*“What possesses any woman of sound mind, whether she be rich or poor, to marry, save the conviction manufactured entirely by men for their own convenience that she, like a cow, should prefer to be bought than to freely choose the recipients of her favors based solely upon her own desires.” – Polly Dicax*

Desire could be communicated, Honora discovered, in the most inconsequential of deeds, the briefest of glances, the minutest of gestures.

When she reached the printers' shop at eleven minutes before the appointed hour, she found Lucas waiting for her. He stood with his back against the narrow wall that separated the front window of Lee & Roth from the lamp and candle shop next door, a folded broadsheet tucked under one arm. At the sight of him, with his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and lean waist accentuated by the cut of his dark blue frock coat, her heart and lungs seemed to cease their normal function, leaving her lightheaded and out of breath. She hadn't expected him to arrive before her, and finding him there gave her a rush of pleasure at the thought that he had been as impatient to see her again as she was to see him. But that sensation was nothing compared to the elation that blossomed in her chest when his gaze landed on her and his features lit with what could only be described as pure delight. The expression was fleeting, but as he strode to meet her at the entrance to the shop, he placed a hand under her elbow, not to guide her, but to convey what he

could not, in such a public setting, say.

*I missed you. I couldn't wait to see you. I cannot see you without needing to touch you. I long for you, ache for you, burn for you.*

And throughout their meeting with Mr. Roth, they exchanged dozens more wordless messages. A nod here. A smile there. A seemingly accidental brush of the fingers or a furtive meeting of the eyes. By the time they were ready to leave the shop, Honora's entire body prickled with anticipation, from the heightened sensitivity of her skin to the taut peaks of her nipples to the heavy, pulsating flesh between her thighs.

There was never a question of walking the nearly two miles between the Marylebone High Street and Lucas's lodgings in Neal Street. As soon as they stepped out of the shop onto the pavement, Lucas hailed the first hackney that came into view. After barking their destination to the driver, he opened the door and clasped her hand to assist her into the compartment. The warmth of his strong, blunt fingers seeped through the kid leather of her gloves, and she caught her breath at the sudden rush of lust this innocent touch provoked. As she ducked her head, his hand slid from hers and rested briefly, but not at all innocently, on her lower back before she sat and slid across the seat. Lucas followed her into the cabin, closed the door, and signaled the driver with the customary knock on the roof. The carriage lumbered out into the heavy traffic and then came to an almost immediate halt. The driver shouted something unintelligible but no doubt laced with expletives at whoever or whatever was blocking their path.

Honora leaned her head back against the seat and let out a low, frustrated sigh. In theory, a carriage ride should be faster than walking, but in practice, this was not always the case, especially if one wished to travel through the heart of London at midday. And with her left side pressed firmly against Lucas's right and his wonderful, spicy scent filling her nostrils, she was not sure how much longer she could wait to be alone with him. To finally slake the hunger that had been building inside her for days.

“No one can really see us, you know,” Lucas said softly. “At least, not well enough to know what we’re doing.”

Her eyebrows rose as she considered the interior dimensions of the coach. “I hardly think there is enough room in here for...well, for *that*.”

A rumble of amusement rolled through his chest. “Indeed, *that* would be quite impossible, at least not without a fair bit of practice. But that isn’t what I meant.” Leaning so close to her that his close-cropped beard grazed the sensitive skin just below her ear, he murmured, “There are other, more discreet ways to achieve satisfaction. I thought we might try a few of those first rather than jumping straight to *that*.”

The brush of his beard and breath sent gooseflesh traveling along her arm, but far from being cold, heat suffused her limbs and settled like a steaming ember between her legs. “What do you have in mind?” she asked, her voice less steady than she would have liked.

In answer, he placed his hand on her lap, just above the juncture of her thighs, and her heart thundered wildly. “You’ve touched yourself here before, surely?” When she nodded, her cheeks flushing, he continued, “And enjoyed the results?”

Swallowing her sudden discomfiture, she whispered, “Yes.”

“Well, I should like to do that for you now,” he said. “If you’ll permit me, of course. I promise you no one outside this coach will ever suspect.”

Whatever obstacle had prevented their forward progress cleared at that precise moment, for the hackney jolted into motion again. The sudden movement caused her bottom to slide forward on the smooth seat and Lucas’s hand to press more firmly against her *mons*. She sucked in her breath as a hot gush of moisture flowed from her flesh. What would he think when he touched her there and discovered how drenched she was? Would he be repelled?

She licked her lips—which were nearly as dry as her nether ones were not—and steadied her nerves. “I think you should know that

I'm very wet there."

At this confession, he made a deep, growling sound, and she needed no help to interpret its meaning. Approval. Arousal. Delight. "Then we're both going to enjoy this very much indeed."

Grasping her skirt, he pulled the pale blue cotton and underlying petticoats upward, baring her stockinged calves and then her knees. As he worked, his fingers skimmed across her limbs, and each brief, incidental contact made her shiver with pleasure. How much better would it be when he touched her *there*, on that small spot that seemed to have become the focus of her entire being? Without conscious thought, she began to help him, gathering the inconvenient masses of fabric into a tight bunch around her hips until her drawers and the bottom of her chemise were exposed.

He laid his hands on her thighs and exerted gentle pressure to push her legs apart. "Spread your legs for me, *mi querida*."

*Querida* meant something like "dear" or "darling," didn't it? Any resistance she might have thought to offer melted in the honeyed warmth of his words. She did as he bade, parting her thighs, and gasped as one palm coasted up the inside of her leg. Her heart no longer beat in her chest; it pulsed *there* instead. *Please, please, please*. If he didn't touch her there soon...no, *now*...she would die of anticipation. His fingers slipped between the slit in her drawers and brushed across the soft, swollen flesh.

Too much. Yet not enough.

"Wider," he coaxed.

When she complied, he dragged one finger over just the right spot. She moaned, first with pleasure and then with disappointment as the digit glanced away.

"Gods," he muttered unsteadily, sliding his fingers further along the folds and then back up again, "you really *are* wet. So sweet. So eager."

Involuntarily, she raised her hips, chasing the contact, desperate for more. And after a few more experimental strokes, during which she was aware that he was studying her intently, seeking clues in

her expression as to what pleased her, he settled into the perfect tempo, angle, and pressure. Pleasure spiraled inward and upward, her pulse pounding, body straining. The hackney swayed and bumped along the London streets, and she was dimly aware of the possibility that strangers might look in the windows to see a man and a woman sitting closely together, their faces mere inches apart, and draw certain, wicked—and correct—conclusions. But rather than quelling the tide that rose beneath his ministrations, the idea that someone might see and guess what they were about only intensified the surge.

She hovered on the precipice, a pinnacle so exquisite she wished it could last forever, even as she was certain she couldn't bear another second. And then the moment was over, her body no longer in her control at all as bliss broke over her in wave after convulsive wave. In some distant corner of her mind, she was aware that Lucas had covered her mouth with his free hand to stifle her cry of pleasure.

Well, she had certainly never done anything quite like *that* to herself, she thought when the crisis had subsided into languid ripples. Opening her eyes, which she hadn't even realized she had closed, she found Lucas looking at her with a rather smug grin.

"Liked that, did you?"

"Mm-hm," was all she could muster the energy to say. She nestled her head against his shoulder, the white lace of her bonnet flattening against her hot cheek, and waited for the frantic pounding of her heart to subside.

Lucas withdrew his hand from between her lower limbs and began rearranging her clothing to some semblance of modesty. Honora rather suspected her skirt would be conspicuously wrinkled until her maid could press the fabric with a hot iron. She would have to take care not to be seen by her parents when she returned home lest the state of the garment raise uncomfortable questions.

With that thought, Honora realized with some chagrin that while *her* discomfort had been assuaged, at least for the nonce,



Lucas's had not. Of course, given the cut of his frock coat, she could not gauge his arousal by purely visual means, but when she tilted her head and peered up into his face, she noted a tautness to the set of his jaw and saw that his black pupils nearly engulfed his irises. As if he were holding himself on a very tight leash. As if he smoldered with the same fire he had quenched for her. Perhaps she could provide him with a similar respite.

The idea, once entertained, sparked a fresh and delicious heat in her veins. She wanted to touch him as he had touched her, to give pleasure for pleasure. And after the intimacies she had just permitted him, there was surely no cause for diffidence in offering to return the favor. Faint heart never won fair lady, after all; why should it win fair gentleman?

She laid her palm over his lower abdomen, near where she had felt his erection when he had kissed her, and was gratified to discover the same thick bulge beneath the concealment of his coat. His response, however, was both instantaneous and unexpected. He jerked in obvious surprise and bit out a curse. She started to draw away, fearing she'd hurt him, but he swiftly grabbed her retreating hand and placed it back in position, clamping his own over the top.

He emitted a ragged breath that was both a moan of pleasure and a groan of torment. "Gods, just don't move and I'll be fine."

But she *wanted* to move. That was, in fact, the entire point. On the other hand, perhaps there was something about the male anatomy that she did not understand. If that was the case, she certainly would not want to do him injury.

"Does it *hurt* if I move?" she asked, resisting the urge to close her fingers around the ridge that pressed—eagerly, it seemed to her—into her touch.

His chest rolled with a deep, gravelly laugh, and he shook his head. "No, quite the contrary; it feels so good that if you move at all, I'm liable to spend in my trousers, and that would be quite a mess."

"Oh," she said, frowning. But at least she wasn't hurting him.

For if she were, she had no idea at all how the act of physical congress was to be achieved. Still, she was puzzled. “I don’t understand. If I understand you correctly, I just *spent* and—well, that was not particularly messy.” Wet, yes, but nothing that would cause any notice.

He gazed down at her, his eyes narrowed in some suspicion. “Do you truly not know what happens when a man reaches his climax?”

Stung, she responded tartly, “All I know is what I have been told and read, which is that a man spills his seed. But a seed is quite small. How much of a mess can one seed make?”

“Oh gods,” he murmured, squeezing the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “I forget, sometimes, how damnably hard the British nobility works to keep basic biological knowledge from women. It’s downright criminal.” With a grimace that was clearly not directed at her, he continued, “The seed of which you’ve heard and read isn’t like the seeds you would plant to grow a flower, but a thick, viscous fluid that spurts from a man’s cock when he comes. That fluid contains his seed, which is too small to be seen by the naked eye. There can, however, be quite a lot of this liquid and it’s quite sticky when it dries, which is why no man wants to lose control and spend in his trousers.”

Honora listened to this explanation with some fascination, for several things suddenly made more sense to her. For example, she had wondered when reading *Every Woman’s Book* why a sponge would be an effective means of preventing pregnancy, but now that she knew a man’s seed was a liquid, the idea seemed much more reasonable. More than that, however, Lucas had introduced her to two new uses of otherwise familiar words, and both were patently wicked and exciting. Just repeating them in her mind—*cock, come*—cause a fresh strand of desire to curl in her abdomen. She wanted to see his cock, to touch it, to do whatever would please him enough to make him come.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she formed the most wanton question she had ever asked. “Could you not remove your

cock from your trousers so you do not come inside them?"

He sucked in his breath, and every muscle in his body went rigid and motionless before he exhaled, slowly and deliberately. "I nearly came from the mere suggestion," he said ruefully. "Under the circumstances, I think it would be kinder to wait until we reach my lodgings. I might not make a mess of my trousers, but I might well make one of the interior of this hackney, and that hardly seems polite to the driver or its future passengers." Lifting her hand from his lap, he pressed a kiss to each of her fingertips. "Be patient with me so I can make this wonderful for you. For both of us."

Well, when he put it like that, how could she object?

## Chapter Eleven

361

*“Nothing is more pathetic and self-serving than to prevent women from enjoying the same fruits men harvest for themselves. One must ask, what is it men fear? That, given the knowledge and freedom to choose their own way, women might throw over the whole male sex except for the necessary function of procreation and be better off for it; for what need would women have of us if we did not deliberately enfeeble them?” – Luke Evangelista*

Much to Lucas’s relief, Mrs. Durant’s door was closed

when they entered the foyer of the boarding house, although he could hear the clink of dishes that told him afternoon tea would soon be served. It would not do for him to be seen escorting a young lady to his rooms in the middle of the day. Clasp ing Honora’s hand in his, he hurried her up the two flights of stairs and ushered her into his rooms with all the desperate eagerness of a besotted bridegroom on his wedding night. Which, in some ways, he supposed this was, for this was as close as he would ever get to marrying Honora Pearce.

She preceded him through the door, every bit as impatient as he, but after he closed the door behind them, she turned wide, astonished eyes on him. “What on earth have you done?” she asked in obvious dismay.

What he had done was tidy up the place. Over the course of the previous evening and the better part of this morning, he had sorted through every stack of papers and periodicals he possessed, disposing of those he no longer needed and storing the items he

wished to keep in several trunks he had purchased for the purpose. As a result of his efforts, his sitting room now actually provided places to sit and clear flat surfaces upon which one might set a cup of tea or glass of whiskey.

And he had done it for her. Because he'd wanted to make things nice for her. Because he'd been embarrassed by the appearance of squalor and chaos the room had presented when she'd made her unannounced visit the day before.

Thus, her remonstrance pricked his temper. "Nothing I shouldn't have done long ago. The place was a fire trap, if nothing else."

"But all of your research material," she cried. "Please tell me you didn't get rid of it!"

She looked so genuinely distressed at the possibility that his irritation dissolved instantly. At least now he understood why she was so perturbed by the change. Though, to be fair, he didn't know why that explanation hadn't occurred to him or why he'd been so quick to take offense.

But no, that wasn't true. He did know. His reaction was born of apprehension. Of the fear that, sooner or later, she would prove herself false. All the evidence and every instinct he possessed told him that Honora was different from the other women of her station he'd known. That she was honest and genuine and every bit as besotted with him as he was with her. Else why would she, an unmarried and chaste lady of quality, decide to take him as a lover? But if he was wrong, it would slay him.

Shaking himself from his dark thoughts, he placed his hat on the rack and gave her a quick smile. "Never fear. I kept everything that could be of any importance or relevance."

"I'm very glad to hear it," she breathed, tugging at the ribbon beneath her chin, "for I'm sure I will have need of your archive for future voter pamphlets."

She drew off her lacy white bonnet, revealing dark hair twisted into a chignon just above the nape of her neck and unadorned by the masses of face-framing curls that were currently so fashionable.

A few multicolored strands—too short to remain confined at the back of her head—fell loose around her temples, and she tucked them behind her ears before handing him the bonnet to hang on the rack beside his own.

His heart twisted at the sight of the two head coverings resting side by side, each on its own peg. They should have looked comically incongruent next to one another—his black and stiff and sober and hers white and soft and frolicsome—and yet they seemed to belong together. Complementary. Like salt and pepper, like pen and paper.

Like husband and wife. Something they would and could never be.

Covering the knife-sharp stab in his chest, he narrowed his eyes in mock reproof. “I begin to think you are more enamored of my personal papers than my person,” he teased, though perhaps there was a tiny bit of truth beneath the jest.

Her laugh was musical and throaty. She tugged at the pinky finger of her left glove and pulled it free as she spoke before pressing her bare hand over her heart. “You wound me, dear sir. Can a woman not admire both the man *and* his manuscripts?”

By the gods, she was quick-witted. And very obviously flirting with him, for she fluttered her eyelashes up at him and began to draw off her other glove with a slow deliberation that she had to know was suggestive and seductive.

“She can,” he agreed, his voice rougher and thicker than he expected, “but the man is in much more immediate need of her attentions.”

Her eyes met his, the gray irises rimming large black pupils like clouds circling the center of a hurricane, and then traveled down the length of his torso to settle near his groin. “Or is it a particular *part* of the man that is in need?”

Oh, yes, definitely that, his aching cock supplied helpfully.

But definitely *not* that. Not yet, at any rate.

“Maybe,” he growled. “Come here.”

It was the first time he had ever issued anything resembling a direct order to her, and the barest hint of a frown crossed her features. But then she did as he bade, tossing her gloves onto a nearby table as she closed the short distance between them. When she was in arms' reach, he scooped her up off the floor and carried her to his desk, where he set her back down again, facing him. As he'd imagined, she was just tall enough that her feet dangled a few inches from the floor and their eyes almost met. Cradling her velvety cheek in one palm, he ran his thumb across her jaw and she shivered, her lips parting in invitation of a kiss.

He shook his head. "Not yet."

Her mouth puckered in a moue of disappointment.

"Before we take this any further," he said, forcing back the tide of lust that threatened to engulf him, "I need to be sure you understand what will happen here. That you want what I want. And the only way I can do that is to tell you exactly what I want."

Her cheeks colored. Her pupils seemed to double in size. "Oh." She swallowed and licked her lips. "Very well. Tell me."

Gods, at this rate, she would kill him before he even began his explanation. "First, there's a question I must ask you."

The corners of her lips deepened with wry amusement. "I think I can guess. You wish to know whether I am a virgin, do you not?"

He faltered, taken aback more by her directness than by the accuracy of her deduction, though on reflection, he should not have been. She seldom minced words. The least he could do would be to return the favor. "Yes, but not because I mean to pass judgment. Nothing could alter my feelings for you. I simply need to know whether I can take it for granted that you are familiar with the basic mechanics of sexual intercourse." Bloody hell, he sounded like a college don, stuffy and didactic. One would think he was discussing Latin grammar or geometric equations instead of fucking.

"Well," she said, pursing her lips thoughtfully, "I *am* a virgin, for as I told you that first evening, I never met a man before you who... interested me in that way. On the other hand, I am not so sheltered

as to be entirely ignorant of the facts of life, for I spent many a summer in the country in the presence of farm animals.” She slanted him a look that was full of mischief but tinged with lust. “Based on this, I believe the male partner—that being you, in this case—inserts his cock—” here, she cupped her hand over the appendage she had just named, causing him to suck his breath through his teeth, “—into the female partner’s...” At this point, she hesitated, obviously stymied for a word. “Well, here,” she finished, removing her hand from his groin and resting it between her own legs in illustration.

Lucas wondered briefly whether a man could pass out from sheer, uncontrollable lust, but when he remained both conscious and upright, concluded that if it was possible, he hadn’t reached quite that stage yet. Damnably close, though. “Cunt,” he supplied hoarsely. “Though there are other words.”

A visible tremor coursed through her frame, and she pressed her palm more tightly to her mons. “Which ones do you use?”

This conversation wasn’t going the way he had expected. So much for stuffy and didactic! He had never spoken in such a frank, carnal manner with a woman or—come to think of it—with anyone, though of course he knew all the dirty words. But there was something freeing and erotic about sharing those words with her. About the idea of telling her, in such dark and wicked terms, what he meant to do if she would permit him.

“That one, I suppose. Quim. Or pussy.” He pressed his hand over hers, where it rested between her legs. “I rather like ‘pussy’ because it’s metaphorical. When I pet you here, where you’re soft and downy like a cat, you purr.” He suited action to words, and she let out a sound that was not so much a purr as a growl.

Still, she managed to find enough of her wits to ask, “And if I stroke your cock, will you crow like a rooster?”

He let out a startled laugh. “Gods, I hope not,” he said on a chuckle, surprised to find that far from dampening his ardor, his amusement only increased his desire for her. Moreover, the things



he wanted to do with her were legion and absolutely obscene. Things an innocent might reasonably find humiliating or distasteful.

Sobering, he said, “Querida, if I do anything you don’t like, anything you don’t wish, you have only to say so and I will stop. If you decide you don’t want to take things any further—at any time—that is your right. I would never take from you anything you are not willing to give. Do you understand?”

Her eyebrows drew together. “What is there beyond petting—”

“Some might call it frigging,” he put in.

“Is that so? Very well, then. What is there beyond frigging and... er...?” She blinked up at him expectantly. Adorably.

*Fuckably.*

“Fucking.”

“*Hmph.* I suppose I should have known that one. I’ve certainly heard my brothers say it. So, there is frigging and fucking and...?”

Oh, he was going to regret teaching her that word. Hearing her say it nearly brought him to his knees. Though, to be fair, his knees were exactly where he planned to be quite soon. “There is kissing,” he told her.

“Well, of course, but—”

“There is kissing,” he interrupted, tucking a knuckle beneath her chin and tilting her head back, “here.”

He touched his mouth to hers and groaned with satisfaction when her lips parted eagerly in invitation. Had it really been only three days since he had kissed her? Those stolen moments inside Rickert’s hidden chamber seemed like a lifetime ago, and he felt as if it had been that long since he had taken a proper breath. He kissed her as though kisses were air and air was a finite commodity, and she seemed no less needy, for she drank in his kisses as if they were water and she was dying of thirst.

Recalling that his purpose had not been simply to kiss them both senseless, he dragged his mouth from hers and feathered his lips across her cheek to the tender flesh beneath her ear. “But also here,” he murmured, catching her lobe between his teeth and

tugging gently.

A shiver coursed through her frame, and she let out a gasp of both pleasure and surprise. Her hands clutched the edge of the desk, as though she feared toppling backward.

“And here,” he whispered and kissed his way down the column of her throat to her shoulder.

At the same time, he reached around and began to undo the hook-and-eye fastenings that closed the back of her gown. When his lips reached her collarbone, he had loosed the last one and the pale blue bodice gaped away from her torso, although the exuberantly puffed sleeves kept the garment from slipping all the way to her waist. Nonetheless, the gap was sufficiently large for him to slide his hand inside and loosen the front of her stays so he could free her breasts from their confinement.

She made another muffled sound as his palm cupped one plump mound. The dusky pink nipple stood taut from the center of the lighter areola, and he bent his head, dragging his lips from her collarbone to the arc of her breast.

“And also here,” he said, before closing his mouth over the distended peak.

“Ohhhh!” Her whole body jerked, her hips rocking against his thigh, which had become, unbeknownst to him, ensconced between hers. He situated that limb more firmly against her quim, encouraging her to use him to assuage the tension he stoked with his lips and teeth and tongue.

And then he dropped to his knees and pressed his face to the spot his leg had vacated. His heart thudded beneath his ribs and his cock seemed determined to burst through the fall of his trousers as the scent of her arousal accosted his nostrils.

“And finally, here,” he muttered thickly. “If you will but permit me.”

## Chapter Twelve

361

*“Romantic feeling is a terrible reason for a woman to marry and make herself little more than the legal of appendage of a man; it is only palatable because the alternative rationales for embarking upon the wedded estate are so much worse.” – Polly Dicax*

Honora went utterly motionless, though her pulse raced at a breakneck pace that left her breathless and unsteady. Surely what Lucas proposed to do was scandalous, shocking, appalling.

*Thrilling.*

“You can— That is, you *want* to do such a thing?” she asked, caught between alarm and fascination. “Put your mouth *there*?”

He raised his head and gazed up at her, his eyes dark and feverish with longing. “Oh, aye, querida. I want to do that as much as—or perhaps even more than—I want to fuck you...and I want to fuck you very, very much.”

*Oh. My. Goodness.*

Except goodness had nothing to do with it. Every word from his mouth was a wicked temptation, and resistance was not merely useless but impossible. He must be mad to want to do such a depraved thing and yet, when she imagined him pressing his lips to *those* lips, she not disgusted by the idea but wildly aroused.

“You can say no if you really dislike the idea,” he assured her. “And once I start, you can ask me to stop if it does not please you. But I think it will please you very much indeed.”

Her stomach fluttering as if an entire flock of birds had become trapped inside it, she nodded. The smile that lit his face was

brighter and warmer than the sun on a clear summer day, and she was fiercely glad she hadn't the will to refuse him.

He gathered her skirts up to her knees and then disappeared underneath them, the voluminous blue fabric settling back around him and almost entirely concealing him. The fancy struck her that, if anyone were to enter the room and find her perched there, they might not even realize he was crouched between her thighs unless they happened to see his booted feet poking out from beneath the hem. She had a fleeting image of attempting to carry on a conversation with someone while Lucas, hidden from view, kissed and licked and petted her most private and sensitive places, and a gusty moan escaped her.

"I haven't even begun," Lucas said in mock reproof. His fingers coasted up her hips to the waistband of her drawers. "First, let's get these off."

He untied the string that cinched them in place and, with her assistance, drew them down over her hips and bottom. When the garment was free of her feet, he placed his palms on the insides of her knees and pulled her forward until she was balanced so precariously on the edge of the desk that she feared she would slip off. She needn't have worried, however, for he settled her legs over his shoulders and gripped her hips, anchoring her securely in place.

And then...oh God, and then his bearded cheeks grazed the delicate skin on the insides of her thighs. His breath gusted across her wet, swollen flesh, somehow managing to be simultaneously cool *and* hot. Instinctively, she tightened her inner muscles, bracing herself for the debauchery that was to come. Hidden as he was from her view, she might as well be blind. Certainly, she had no way to predict when or how he would begin his sensual assault upon her person, and the uncertainty heightened her anticipation.

Whatever she had been waiting for, however, it was not for him to nuzzle her with his nose. But that was what he did, inhaling deeply as though her sex had the aroma of a fine wine or expensive perfume. All thought fled and sensation narrowed down to one

throbbing, needful point. Her hands gripped the edge of the desk, and she scooted her hips further forward in a desperate effort to increase the pressure.

“So sweet,” he growled, his mouth close enough that she felt his words as much as she heard them.

Surely *now* he would kiss her. Honora held her breath, afraid she would cry out when he finally did the terrible, wonderful deed.

She felt the slight rasp of his mustache first, just above the cleft, before he set his lips fully upon her. If he hadn’t been holding her, she would have fallen off the desk, for the sensation was so exquisite that her body jolted in response. He hummed, steadied her with strong, gentle hands, and deepened the kiss.

And it was recognizably a kiss, although of course she had no way to return the slanting, stroking pressure of his lips as she would when he kissed her on the mouth. What he was doing had to be wrong, could not be something that normally transpired between men and women, yet that certainty only increased her pleasure. The peak remained just out of reach, however, and she whimpered and wriggled in frustration.

“Shhhh,” he murmured, the vibration sending tremors through her limbs.

*So close. Too far.*

He said something else, low and rough, though she couldn’t make sense of the syllables, and then he *licked* her. She flinched in pure astonishment, but his tongue drew a languorous line through her quim—yes, that seemed the proper word, just the right balance between the vulgar-sounding *cunt* and the more playful *pussy*—before swirling around her entrance.

She had no time to register astonishment at this intimacy, however, for he replaced his tongue with a finger. Between his saliva and her own juices, she was so wet that the digit slid easily into her channel, even though her muscles tightened as if to repel the invasion. Except she didn’t *want* him to remove the finger. No, she wanted him to *move* it, she realized. To *fuck* her with it.

He seemed to read her mind—or, more likely, he had done this often enough to know what she desired—because he withdrew almost all the way and then drove back in, slowly the first time, quicker the next. She canted her hips to afford him better, deeper access. When a second finger soon joined the first, there was a brief twinge as her body stretched to accommodate the thicker intrusion, and the thought flashed through her mind that his cock was much bigger than two fingers. The pain was mild and swiftly forgotten, however, when his mouth descended once again and his tongue stroked the aching focal point of her tension.

The two sensations—plunging fingers and caressing tongue—merged into one, and the pinnacle that had eluded her surged like a winter storm. She might have tried to hold back the tide if she'd had the wits, but the pleasure was too much and too good. Smothering a cry with the back of her hand, she came, her inner muscles clamping down on his fingers as bliss spiraled through her, leaving her limp and languid and deeply satisfied.

He'd been right; his kisses pleased her very much indeed, wherever he applied them. In fact, the more forbidden and intimate the location, the better she seemed to like them. If anyone had asked her half an hour ago, she would've told them she could achieve no greater ecstasy than he had given her with his fingers in the hackney. She would have been terribly wrong.

Her skirts billowed around her legs and Lucas emerged from beneath them, wiping a hand over his mouth and chin as he rose to his feet. His dark eyes glittered with happiness but also with heat and hunger. He stood, resuming his former position between her open thighs, and kissed her mouth again. Suddenly, *this* was the most erotically indecent thing she had ever experienced, for she could taste and smell herself in the sweet, musky tang of his lips and tongue. Sated though she was, a fresh bead of longing welled up in her core, and she found herself returning Lucas's kiss with wild urgency. Curling one hand around his neck, she threaded her fingers into the dense, soft hair at the base of his skull, reveling in

the needy growl that rose in this throat. The realization that she had so much power over him aroused her more powerfully than she could have dreamed.

With a groan of obvious reluctance, he broke the kiss and pulled back far enough to study her face intently. "You're making it very difficult for me to act like a gentleman, *querida*." His voice had a serrated quality, as if the very act of speech lacerated his restraint. "I won't lie; I want to fuck you. So much, it hurts. But you must want me to. So if you don't, say the word, and this ends here. You have already given me more than enough of yourself for one day."

Honora cupped his bristled cheek in her hand and smiled. He might intend to dissuade her from taking this final and irreversible step, but every word was more seduction than discouragement. How could she fail to want what he wanted when everything he had wanted up to now had been entirely to her benefit? She could not imagine that she would enjoy the act of sexual union any less than anything that had come before. In fact, based on previous experience, she rather expected to relish this consummation even more. "I want you to fuck me, Lucas," she told him.

A shudder ran through his body, and he let out a snort of amusement. "I should not have taught you the meaning of that word. Hearing it from your sweet mouth is going to kill me."

Once again, the sheer immensity of her power to affect him swamped her in desire. "Fuck me, Lucas," she repeated, half teasing, half demanding. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

"Gods, woman," he barked, but there was laughter—and barely restrained lust—in his tone. "You are a menace. But you're also going to get your way." Sliding his hands under her bottom, he lifted her off the desk and then adjusted his hold so he cradled her across his chest, one arm supporting her back, the other beneath her knees. "I do feel, however, that I should warn you," he continued as he strode in the direction of the half-open door that separated the sitting room from what must be his bedchamber, "it's liable to be a bit uncomfortable."

Nestled against the sturdy warmth of his chest, Honora recalled the mild twinge she'd experienced when he had added that second finger to the first. She also remembered how quickly the soreness had been replaced by bliss. "I've heard it can be the first time, but I think I can manage it."

"I have heard that, too," he admitted, sounding rueful, "but that wasn't the sort of discomfort I was thinking of." Turning sideways, he put his shoulder to the door to push it the rest of the way open, revealing the chamber that lay on the other side.

As he carried her across the threshold—very much in the fashion of a bridegroom, she noted with a flash of irony—Honora saw that this room had none of the exuberant abundance that characterized the one they had departed. Indeed, its furnishings, limited to a wardrobe, a bed, a straight-backed chair, and washbasin with an accompanying mirror, were as spare and utilitarian as a monk's cell. Also ironic, given what they meant to do here.

Lucas eased her to her feet and then gestured in the general direction of the bed. "*That* is what I had in mind."

Which was when she noticed—*really* noticed—just how *very* apt her instinctive comparison of his bedchamber to a monk's cell had been, for the bed frame was exceptionally narrow and clearly intended for only one person, and not a large person at that. The mattress, though concealed by several woolen blankets, would be tick-stuffed with straw or a similar material, likely thin and prone to lumps. The single pillow was probably also straw-filled and equally uneven.

"It is not exactly what you're accustomed to, I imagine," he added apologetically. "So if you would prefer not to—"

She whirled to face him, her loosened bodice sliding further down her arms with the sudden movement, and said with a touch of asperity, "I would prefer you stop treating me like some pampered princess who cannot bear the slightest inconvenience." Softening her tone, she traced a finger from the slightly tilted corner of his left eye to his clenched jaw. "I am tougher than you seem to think,



and I've no intention of *sleeping*, in any case. I need this. Need *you*."

Laughter rumbled in his chest again as he swept her into a tight embrace and pressed his lips to her temple. "You had certainly better not sleep," he muttered before setting her away. "Turn around."

With a nod, she spun her back to him, and his fingers worked their way down her spine as he unfastened the remaining hooks until the gown gaped away from her body. She tugged her arms out of the sleeves, and the entire garment swished into a puddle around her ankles. With an alacrity that suggested more than passing familiarity with the workings of female undergarments, he loosened her petticoats and unlaced her stays, and these followed the dress to the floor, leaving her in chemise, drawers, stockings, and boots.

A shiver shook her, and he kissed the nape of her neck. "Cold?"

"No," she said. In fact, if anything, she was overwarm.

"Excited." And nervous. She had never wanted anything more than she wanted this, but she had also never been so far out of her depth. And she had never been—nor had she ever imagined being—almost naked with a man, especially not one who was still completely clothed. The imbalance made her feel...vulnerable.

But somehow Lucas seemed to understand her apprehension, because he asked, "Would you like to help me undress?"

The familiar curl of heat and hunger twisted in her belly. "Yes, please."

Working together, they stripped him of frock coat, cravat, and waistcoat. She opened the buttons of his shirt from the base of his throat to the center of his chest, revealing an expanse of rich brown skin covered with a sprinkling of black hair. When he lowered the braces of his trousers and pulled the shirt off over his head, she saw the strands were longer and sparser across his pectoral muscles but became both shorter and denser further down, coalescing into a line down the center of his chest that disappeared into his trousers.

A line that led her eyes straight to the unmistakable bulge where his cock strained against his trousers. Her mouth went dry and her

quim became wetter.

“Open it,” he urged, his voice guttural.

Fingers trembling, she undid the buttons that secured his fall, almost painfully aware of the way the chiseled muscles of abdomen rippled and flexed every time her hand brushed the ridge of his erection. When she was finished, that portion of his anatomy was concealed only by the thin linen of his drawers. Her body thrummed with anticipation as she untied the string that held that final garment in place.

The appendage sprang free, jutting thick and upright from the base of black curls at the apex of his thighs. She squeezed her own thighs together as another gush of moisture gathered between them.

“Can I touch?” she asked, fascinated by the contrast between the poker-hard member and the velvety-soft appearance of the skin at its tip.

He flashed a grin and nodded. “But not for long. Or this will be over before we get to the bed.”

When she wrapped her palm around him, he sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth, and she released him instantly. Before she could draw away, however, he grabbed her hand and guided it back into position, encouraging her to continue her exploration.

“I’m tougher than I sound,” he said lightly, in obvious echo of her earlier pronouncement about her own ability to endure discomfort. “Having you touch me just feels very, very good.”

Thus reassured, Honora closed her fingers around his length, marveling at the silky, dewy texture of the skin that covered the rigid shaft beneath. His flesh was fever-hot and pulsed with life, pressing into her hand as though actively seeking her attention. She dragged her thumb across the petal-soft tip and through a droplet that seeped from the tiny slit at the very top. The liquid was clear and slick, much like the wetness gathering between her own thighs.

Lucas uttered a strangled sound that might have been a curse and gently removed her hand. “I think that’s enough for now.”

He brought her hand to his mouth and gave her thumb a slow,

sensuous lick, and she shuddered at the memory of tasting of her own sex on his mouth. What would *he* taste like? Suddenly, she was burning not just with desire, but with curiosity.

“Would you let me take you in my mouth?” she asked.

His entire body stiffened, and he half laughed, half groaned.

“Not only will I *let* you, querida, but at some point, I will likely beg you to do so. But not today.” Gazing down at her with eyes as dark and hot as coal, he said hoarsely, “Take off the rest of your clothes, Honora. I want you naked and in my bed.”

Heart thudding madly in her ears, she nodded and finished undressing. Heat rose in her cheeks and in her quim as she worked, and when she was completely nude, she had to smother the impulse to cover her breasts and mons. Modesty was ridiculous when he’d already put his tongue and fingers on—and even *inside*—her most private places, and yet she couldn’t entirely suppress the impulse to hide.

But when she managed to lift her chin and meet his eyes, her shyness fled. He was looking at her with an expression that bordered on reverence, as though she were a goddess and his only desire was to worship her. She could no more feel shame or embarrassment in the face of such admiration than she could have prevented herself from regarding him in much the same way.

Because he was beautiful. Broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, and corded with lean muscle, he resembled every classical sculpture of a naked male torso she had ever seen, except that his muscles rippled and flexed beneath warm brown skin instead of being captured in cold white marble. His thighs and calves were similarly chiseled with sinew. And then there was his cock, rising from the nest of black curls, thick and hard and ready. For her.

In one swift movement, he crossed the plank floor and swept the blankets from the bed, revealing a clean if somewhat threadbare sheet. She started toward the bed, but he swept her off her feet and laid her in the center of the mattress, which was softer than she had been led to expect. Or perhaps she just didn’t care, because he

followed her down, stretching his body out over hers, propping himself on his elbows. Heat radiated from his skin and his erection nestled against her abdomen, the velvety tip pressing into her navel.

His mouth seized hers in a greedy kiss that made her head spin while his thighs insinuated themselves between hers. She readily opened her legs for him, and when they were quite wide, he shifted his position and she closed her eyes, preparing herself for whatever pain might accompany his first intrusion into her body.

But the expected intrusion didn't come. Instead, he kissed his way down her torso, lavishing attention on her neck, her breasts, her belly and finally once again settling on the core of her need with his lips and tongue. This time, he was swift and certain in finding his rhythm and he used not two fingers but three. There was another slight twinge of discomfort, but then there was nothing but glorious pleasure and she came, her back arching off the bed as she shuddered and sobbed with release.

Only then did he slide back up her body and placed the head of his cock against the entrance to her quim.

"Honora," he said gently.

She opened eyes she hadn't realized were closed. His handsome features were drawn sharp with the restraint he was obviously exerting over himself. "Lucas," she answered, reaching up to caress his taut jawline.

"You can still say no." His gaze was serious. Somber.

She couldn't begin to imagine what it was costing him to make that offer. Shaking her head, she said, "No," and then, when he stiffened at what he must wrongly be taking as a rejection, swiftly corrected herself. "No, I won't say no. What I mean is yes." To punctuate her words, she canted her hips upward and raised her knees in an instinctive invitation.

"Thank the gods," he rasped and pressed himself inside her.

The feeling as her passage stretched to accommodate his girth was peculiar, for his cock was considerably larger in circumference

than even three fingers, but not painful. Once he had seated himself to the hilt inside her, she was delighted to discover the sensation was not merely tolerable but in fact quite wonderful.

“All right?” he asked.

“Better than that.”

“Good.” Leaning down, he gave her a kiss so exquisitely tender that tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

This language might be new to her, but it possessed an eloquence far more potent than mere words. Desire, passion, devotion, love: they were all just empty strings of consonants and vowels compared to their physical manifestation. She felt as if she had been given a key that unlocked a corner of the universe whose existence she had heard of but had never been able to verify. A place where two people could, for a short time, be so closely connected that it was like sharing a body. Like truly being *one flesh*.

With a sigh of pure contentment, she curled her arms around his neck and melted into the kiss. If there was anything better than this simple, sweet sense of union, she could not imagine what it might be. Then he began to move, and she didn’t have to imagine at all, because surely *this* was what she had wanted all along.

He started slowly, easing out and then in again with a gentle rocking motion. Honora would have sworn that she was thoroughly spent and quite incapable of achieving yet another climax, but the delicate friction just *there* coaxed a fresh and unmistakable pulse of arousal that told her otherwise. Except this placid pace wouldn’t be enough, and she slid her hands from his neck down to clutch the sleekly rounded muscles of his bottom and pulled him tighter, deeper, into her.

Breaking the kiss, Lucas lifted his head and searched her face. “I’m not hurting you?”

With an exasperated huff, she shook her head. “Quite the reverse. But I want...I *need* more.”

His lips quirked into a fleeing smile, but his eyes were dark and hot. “Then more is what you shall have.”

And more was what he gave her, withdrawing almost completely and thrusting back in again, over and over, faster and harder. Pressure and pleasure built up inside her, and she was intensely aware of the obscenity of what they were doing. Of his thick cock driving into her and the wet, slapping sounds their bodies made and the breathless grunts and moans that escaped them both as they strained together to achieve release.

No wonder people wanted to fuck, she thought dizzily. It was marvelous. In fact, she wondered that anyone ever wanted to do anything else!

His mouth closed over one of her nipples, his teeth grazing the sensitive flesh, and the scrape and tug sent her crashing over the edge. He continued his relentless rhythm, stroking into her and prolonging the bliss while her inner muscles clasped and released him.

Her climax was fading into ripples when, with a muffled shout, Lucas pulled out and, kneeling between her thighs, took his cock into his fist. He pumped himself several times before he shuddered with release. A thick, white fluid spurted from the tip of his cock onto her belly, and she realized that by spilling his seed outside her body, he was attempting to protect her from conceiving. Something she had foolishly not even thought to worry about.

Lucas Delgado really was the best of men. The best of lovers. Every step of the way, he had made certain of her agreement, ensured her safety, and cared for her well-being. Kind, decent, trustworthy...not to mention extraordinarily skilled in the carnal arts. He would make some woman a fine husband one day.

*Maybe, a traitorous and seductive voice in her head whispered, that woman could even be you.*

## Chapter Thirteen

13

*“Never forget that the Sheriff of Nottingham was the villain and that his primary crime was the imposition of collection of unfair and oppressive taxes. Today, the British crown, in its demand of 4d in stamp duty, plays the role of the sheriff and the publisher who refuses to pay it of Robin Hood.” – Luke Evangelista*

Lucas was fastening the hooks up the back of Honora’s dress in preparation for her all-too-hasty departure when someone knocked at the door to his rooms.

She cast a dismayed glance over her shoulder at him. “Were you expecting someone?”

Frowning, he shook his head “No.” Unanticipated callers were becoming rather too common an occurrence for comfort. “Wait here while I find out who it is and send them away.”

If he *could* send them away, he thought with some apprehension. And then actual terror flooded his veins. What if the police had managed to discover Lucas’s true identity and had come to arrest him? It seemed unlikely—none of his printers knew his real name or address, and he was scrupulous about maintaining his incognito with his writers, at least until now—but wasn’t outside the realm of possibility. And if it was the police, then things were about to get very bad, very quickly. For Honora to be caught here, in his rooms, would be a disaster in more ways than he could even consider.

Mierda, but he had been a damned fool to let her know where he lived in the first place, and bringing her here for an illicit tryst was nothing short of idiocy. Whether it was the magistrate or his

landlady or (gods forbid) his parents at the door, the consequences would be unpleasant, to varying degrees, for her as well as for him.

The knocking became more insistent as he closed the door between the sitting room and his bedchamber.

“I say, brother, I know you’re in there!”

Lucas’s knees weakened as relief, combined with a prickle of annoyance, replaced his fear. *Rahul*. The only person Lucas *hadn’t* thought of who both knew where he lived and would have the audacity to turn up without prior announcement. The question was *why* his best friend would be making an impromptu call on a Saturday afternoon when they’d met as usual just says ago.

Reaching the door, Lucas yanked it open. It was only when Rahul’s expression cycled from impatience to surprise that Lucas remembered he must look like an unmade bed.

Or, entirely accurately, like someone who had just sprung from one.

“What are you doing here?” he barked, then regretted his unwelcoming tone. “That is,” he continued, gentling his voice, “is everything all right?”

His friend’s face broke into a delighted grin, any astonishment at Lucas’s dishevelment apparently forgotten. Without warning, Rahul stepped across the threshold and clasped Lucas in an enthusiastic embrace. “My parents have approved of my marriage to Maggie! We are to be wed in three weeks’ time, first in the Anglican church for the sake of English law and then in Marathi fashion. I’ve come to ask you to stand for me as my best man.”

“Well, of course I will,” Lucas said, staggering a little when his friend released him. “But why the rush? Couldn’t this news have waited for coffee on Thursday?”

Rahul laughed. “I was too happy to wait until then to tell you. You know how worried I was about how they’d react to Maggie’s not only being English but having been on the stage. But oddly enough, I think that seems to have made them more accepting.”

“That is odd,” Lucas murmured, his body still sagging.



“I thought so, too, until I learned that they’ve been reading a serial called *The Adventures and Misadventures of Miss Persephone White*. The heroine is a virtuous but penniless young woman who becomes an actress as an honest way to make a living. I think, based on this story, they have concluded the English are as unfairly prejudiced against female performers as they are against people from India, and have decided this makes Maggie ‘one of us.’”

By this time, Rahul had brushed past Lucas and was preparing to hang his hat on one of the available pegs on the rack. He froze midmotion, eyeing the lacy white and blue-beribboned bonnet that dangled conspicuously from one of the hooks. Glancing over his shoulder, he raised his eyebrows. “Not your usual style.”

Lucas felt heat rise in his face as his friend looked him up and down and came to the obvious—and correct—conclusion.

“I’m interrupting.” Rahul slanted a speculative gaze around the sitting room, which had certainly never been so orderly on any of his previous visits, and smiled. “You have taken my advice and seized the day. Good!” He clapped Lucas on the back.

“Congratulations.”

“I’m not sure congratulations are quite what’s in order.” Casting a glance in the direction of the bedchamber, Lucas grimaced. “If it had been anyone but you... I cannot believe I was so careless.”

His irresponsibility shamed him. Nor could he console himself with the excuse that he had been unaware of the risks; he had known and recognized them from the first. Yet somehow, he had allowed himself to imagine that if he was smart enough and vigilant enough, he could keep Honora safe. That he could have her without paying the consequences. It was nothing more than pure, blind luck that she was, as yet, unharmed.

Gods, why had he been such a fool? But he knew, didn’t he?

On a whisper, he added, “I love her, you know.”

Expression sobering, Rahul gave Lucas’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Then you will find a way. I am sure of it. After all, if my parents can come around to having Maggie as a daughter-in-law,

anything is possible.”

A well-intentioned observation, Lucas thought, but hardly apropos to his situation. At worst, Rahul faced the disapprobation of his family in his choice of a mate. To be sure, having to choose between one’s parents and one’s beloved would be emotionally devastating and was not a decision Lucas would wish on an enemy, let alone his best friend. Even so, the repercussions were hardly comparable, for Lucas was putting Honora at risk not only of losing her family, but also of losing her livelihood and even her freedom if her incognita was pierced.

And the only way to protect her was to put an end to this. Today. Before it was too late.

After Rahul made a hasty and apologetic departure, Lucas headed back to the bedchamber. Unlike his friend, however, he was in no hurry. His heart felt like a leaden weight in his chest. Perhaps he was overestimating Honora’s attachment to him on the basis of his own feelings for her, but he did not relish sending her away for good. So long as he was a criminal—by definition if not design—he represented too great a danger to her.

What if he were to give up publishing *The Weekly Disciple*? Yes, he would be forgoing his only current source of income, but he could return to the practice of law, which—however dispiriting he had found it—had at least been moderately lucrative. In fact, he supposed becoming a solicitor might make him respectable enough for her parents to consider him acceptable, if not to say desirable, marriage material. Not that a change in his profession would affect Honora’s opposition to the wedded state, of course. Still, if he went back to making a living without breaking the law, they could carry on an intimate acquaintance without putting her in legal jeopardy,

although the personal consequences could still be damaging to her.  
And he would be miserable.

He knew it as soon as he contemplated the possibility. The law was made to preserve the power of the already powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless, and he could no more turn his hand to supporting that cause than he could put the woman he loved in unnecessary peril.

Granted, periodicals that promoted radical and reformist causes were as common in London as fog and deprivation; no sooner had the police shut down one such publication than another sprang up in its place, often produced by the very same person who had just been prosecuted and had paid the penalty for the transgression.

Nonetheless, Lucas fancied he brought a unique perspective to the inequities and injustices of the British Empire both at home and abroad. His status as an outsider, albeit one who had spent the majority of his life on English soil, and as the product of a union that could not have occurred if not for the colonization of his maternal ancestor's country by the Spanish, made him peculiarly suited to the task of analyzing and enumerating the problems that plagued the subjects of his adopted country. And while he did not for one moment believe the world could be changed solely by his or any other individual's words, turning his persuasive rhetoric toward upending the status quo had brought him a measure of gratification and peace of mind that defending it at the bar had never done.

No, he could not stop writing and publishing *The Weekly Disciple*, and equally, he could not afford to continue doing so without committing the crime of tax evasion. The time had come to accept—and effect—the inevitable.

He turned the knob and opened the door to the bedchamber. Honora sat on the edge of the mattress, her half-fastened bodice, tumbled locks, and kiss-swollen lips giving silent witness to the afternoon's activity. No one, upon seeing her in this state, would have any doubt as to what the two of them had been up to. The two small smears of blood on the towel draped over the wash basin

provided additional evidence of his perfidy. The enormity of his transgression punched him in the gut. He had relieved her of her virginity and now he would cast her aside. The fact that it was for her own safety hardly mattered.

Her welcoming smile faded as she caught his unhappy mood. “Whatever is the matter?”

Knowing there was no point in prolonging the pain, he said, “We mustn’t see each other again, querida. *That*—” he jerked his head in the direction of the sitting room to indicate Rahul’s unexpected visit, “—was a warning, and we’d best heed it.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand what you mean. Wasn’t that gentleman a good friend?”

“He’s not only a good friend, we are as close as brothers.” Settling beside her on the bed, he slid his hand through hers. Her skin was warm and very smooth but for a discernible callous on her right index finger. “But when he knocked, my first thought was that the police or Lord Hornsby had gotten Rickert or another of my publishers to inform on me and that he had arrived to arrest me. That wasn’t what happened, of course, but I realized it *could* happen...at any time, and if it does happen, it would be disastrous if you were here.”

“Not as disastrous as you might think,” she said wryly. “I’m the daughter of an earl, and one very highly placed in the government. As you yourself pointed out, the rules are different for people like me.”

Lucas shook his head. “How would you explain being caught in my bedchamber to your father?”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed, but she stiffened her shoulders. “I would explain that I am a grown woman and my personal affairs are none of his business.”

“And you think that would work? That he would not ask questions, such as how you came to be acquainted with someone like me? We are hardly likely to have met by some random happenstance, after all.”

She pursed her lips, and Lucas had to fight the urge to kiss her. After a few seconds, she rolled her eyes and nodded. "Very well. You're right, of course. It would be rather difficult to explain my presence in your lodgings without revealing some facts he would probably find unpalatable."

"Including that you are Polly Dicax."

"Yes," she admitted with a grim nod.

"So you see why we cannot continue to meet here. However much we may want to, you have too much to lose. I don't want to be responsible for causing you to fall out with your family, especially if that might also mean you had to give up one of your most successful pseudonyms."

"Well, that's very noble of you," she said, her gray eyes growing fierce as a thunderstorm, "but do you honestly believe I could stand by and do nothing if you were arrested?"

"You *should* do exactly that. I've never seen a publisher face anything worse than a fine and a few weeks in prison for failure to pay the stamp tax, and most never even pay the entire fine. It's an inconvenience I'd prefer to avoid, but for me, it will be little more than that. For you, it could be a disaster. And I love you too much to let that happen when I have the means to prevent it."

Her mouth had been open—no doubt with the intention of contradicting him—before he finished speaking but she failed to utter a word for several seconds. Instead, she just stared at him, her eyes wide and shimmering with emotion. "You...love me?" Her voice was strangled, as though she could scarcely bring herself to say the words.

Wrapping his arms around her, he dragged her across his lap and kissed her, deeply and lavishly. "What the bloody hell did you think all *this* was about? I have loved you from the moment Rickert shoved us into that closet together and I realized who you must be. I knew then that I would never meet another soul so eminently suited to be my mate, because even though we had only just met, I already knew everything about you from reading your work."

“I felt the same way. I *feel* the same way.” With a sigh, she pressed her lips to the crook of his neck and then to the corner of his mouth. “Whatever are we to do now?”

“Stay away from each other,” he said firmly. “We must go back to communicating by means of the offices. I’ll send any material I find or write that you might be able to use for the next three voter’s guides there, and you can send me your articles via the same route, keeping all of our messages as impersonal as possible. And we will count ourselves lucky that we got a few stolen days together.”

After a long, pensive moment, she expelled another heavy breath and wriggled from his embrace, getting to her feet and presenting him her back. “You’d best finish fastening me up, then.”

## Chapter Fourteen

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*“Electoral reform is essential, not just to enfranchise our own citizenry, but to end the morally repugnant practice of slavery in all British territories once and for all; for so long as any human being remains chained, none of us is free.” – Polly Dice*

One week, one day, and nineteen hours—yes, she was counting—had passed since Honora and Lucas had agreed never to see one another again, and she was bloody miserable.

The unqualified success of the voter information guide, which had proved so popular that the first thousand free copies ran out within an hour and Roth & Lee had gone on to print and sell nearly nine thousand more at the outrageous price of sixpence each, consoled her not at all. If anything, this triumph increased her wretchedness, because she had no way to share it with or even give proper credit to the one person who had made the entire project possible.

She also gained no comfort from writing several screeds directed toward, in order: the systematic criminalization of journalism through stamp taxes and frivolous charges of seditious libel against publishers who were the least bit critical of government policies; the ongoing efforts of the West India Committee to prevent the emancipation of slaves in British colonies, particularly through the purchase of rotten boroughs; and finally, the current state of law which dispensed the same penalty—death—for sodomy as for rape, yet perversely found no problem with a man having carnal

knowledge of a girl so long as she was more than twelve years of age and claimed she had agreed to the act. As if the private behavior of consenting adults was of more interest to the state than the predatory vices of men who preferred children to grown women! But while penning this last piece had given her a certain degree of moral satisfaction, in part because she knew it would offend the sensibilities of so many supposedly virtuous people, it had not, in the end, relieved her malaise.

She missed Lucas the way she would a severed limb, like a leg she had depended on to support her that was suddenly gone. Ridiculous, perhaps, when they had spent only a few days in one another's company, but those days had made all the difference. How could she be content with what she now knew was half a life? Oh, not because he "completed" her in some mystical way, but because he'd introduced her to parts of herself she had never known existed: to her longing for a kind of intellectual and emotional companionship that her family and friends could not provide, and to her own body's hitherto unsuspected capacity for astonishing physical pleasure. And having unearthed those aspects of her nature, she was unable to reconcile herself to burying them again.

It would not be so dreadful, she reflected, if she had some way of communicating with him beyond brief, impersonal notes.

*Enclosed, please find this week's article. – PD*

*Payment for last week enclosed. -- LE*

*Received 2s6d. -- PD*

Between the paucity of the messages and the necessity of avoiding any expressions of tenderness that might indicate an intimacy between them, Honora had taken to perusing with a keen eye the one missive Lucas had sent, searching for something in his handwriting—a slight wobble in the strokes, perhaps, or an extra



flourish on individual letters or words—that would suggest he suffered as keenly as she did from the lack of interaction. But alas, even on the hundredth examination, she could find nothing in those twenty-six characters to which she might impute an alternative meaning.

With a resigned sigh, Honora set aside Lucas's note yet again and opened the drawer in which she kept her unfinished manuscripts. She hadn't looked in this particular drawer since parting from Lucas, preferring instead to focus assembling on the second voter pamphlet, which had gone into circulation today, and then on writing the new Polly Dicax essays. The title at the top of the first page—which was otherwise blank—caught her eye.

*The Adventures and Misadventures of Miss Persephone White:*  
*Episode 18*

And suddenly, she knew exactly what to do.

There had been no mistaking the source of the packet that had been waiting for Lucas in the office on Little White Lion Street this morning. He would recognize in Honora's bold yet elegant hand anywhere.

The trouble was that it was Monday and, moreover, that Polly Dicax's articles typically arrived directly at the printer's shop on Tuesdays rather than being delivered to the office. Not only was the timing wrong, but the package was much thicker than it should have been if it contained one of her essays, which could be no more than five handwritten pages to fit in the space he reserved for them. She never exceeded her allotted space nor did she ever fail to fill it. But this package must contain at least three times as many pages.

So what on earth was in it? He could not imagine that Honora had written and sent him anything of a personal or potentially

identifying nature. She was far too clever to do something so foolish, but he burned with curiosity nonetheless and, since he could not safely linger in the office long enough to open and read the contents, he was forced to suffer the ten-minute walk back to Neal Street in considerable agitation.

When he reached his own rooms, he did not even bother to remove his hat or overcoat, despite the fact that both were damp from the chilly May fog that was wet without quite amounting to a drizzle. Instead, he crossed directly to his desk near the window and, after dropping the rest of the correspondence he had retrieved onto the well-worn surface, untied and ripped into Honora's parcel open with unsteady fingers.

Just as he had suspected from the weight and thickness of the package, there were far more than five pages enclosed. Later, when he counted, he found there were eighteen. All bore Honora's distinctive penmanship, but he puzzled for several seconds over the title and author attribution that appeared at the top of the first sheet of paper.

*The Adventures and Misadventures of Miss Persephone White:*

*Episode 18*

*By M. Honeywell*

Wasn't that the title of the serial Rahul's parents had read? The one that had resulted in their unexpectedly enthusiastic acceptance of a former opera singer as a daughter-in law?

Lucas's eyes drifted down the page. Since he had not read any of the previous seventeen episodes, he could not judge the consistency of either the plot or the language with the rest of the story, but there was a confidence to the storytelling that convinced him of Honora's familiarity with both. A familiarity that seemed unlikely to belong to anyone but the author.

Honora was M. Honeywell. That was the only rational conclusion. She had told him, hadn't she, that she wrote under

three pseudonyms—two known to her parents and one that was not? He knew the one that her parents did not and, of course, Mary Weather, which she would have had no reason to conceal from anyone, given the utter wholesomeness of those books. M. Honeywell must be the third.

But why had she sent *him* these pages? Surely she didn't intend that he should publish them; aside from anything else, *The Weekly Disciple* did not print fictional stories. So what possible use did she imagine Lucas would have for them? The only way to know, he supposed, was to read and find out.

He carried the manuscript to his armchair, sat down, and began to read.

The chapter opened with a scene between the story's eponymous heroine and her...well, how to describe the character of Gabriel Jones? It was immediately clear that Jones, a Bow Street Runner, had played a central role in Persephone's many escapades. Lucas did not get the sense, however, that Jones had been much more than a necessary instrument of the plots, which seemed to involve the danger-prone heroine engineering her own rescues by means of enlisting the Bow Street Runner's aid. But in this episode, the dynamic was different.

Here, it was Mr. Jones requesting Miss White's assistance. He had been hired to find a pair of stolen cufflinks, and his principal suspect in the crime was an aristocrat who also happened to be an ardent admirer of the heroine. Unfortunately, the Bow Street Runner had no concrete evidence linking the aristocrat to the theft. Since Miss White had so often been the inventor of clever schemes that unmasked the perpetrators of other criminal enterprises, did she have any suggestions for how Jones might proceed without betraying his suspicions?

This exchange, in and of itself, might not have alerted Lucas to the change in the arc, but the heroine's inner monologue during the conversation certainly did. Persephone, according to the text, noticed the shape of Jones's lips when he spoke and the breadth of

his shoulders when he settled back in his chair to await her response. She wondered why she hadn't perceived his physical attractions before now and found herself unexpectedly pleased by his respect for her intellect and actual abilities. Men—and even many women—so seldom appreciated her for anything outside her appearance that she hadn't even realized how much she craved recognition for what she could *do*, not just how she looked.

By the time Lucas had reached the middle of the chapter, he knew why Honora had sent him the pages. It was a love letter. Coded as fiction, but a love letter nonetheless. And when he reached the end, he knew what *he* was meant to do: write back.

Honora Pearce was a bloody genius.

Episodes 18 and 19 of *The Adventures and Misadventures of Miss Persephone White* were published together rather than with the usual month between chapters. Episode 19, which took the serial in a new direction by telling the story from Gabriel Jones's point of view, was broadly praised by ardent devotees of the tale and new readers alike.

Despite Honora's initial concern that some readers would object to the previously chaste Miss White's romantic interest in any man, copies sold out within a week, and Roth & Lee begged her to deliver the next two episodes as soon as possible to capitalize on the sudden increase in demand.

She sent Lucas half of the proceeds, of course. It was only fair, since he had written half of the story. Under different circumstances, she would have found a way to credit him, as well, by adding his pen name as an author of the new volume, but she had no idea what name to use and, anyway, M. Honeywell might just as well be two people as one.

The next two installments were published two weeks later and, despite a doubling of the print run, sold out even more quickly.

Honora had begun writing Episode 22, wherein Persephone White would liberate Gabriel Jones from the clutches of the evil aristocrat, when the bottom fell out.

## Chapter Fifteen

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*“Asking Miss White to assist him in an investigation was profoundly irresponsible, but Jones could think of no one whose advice and instincts he trusted more. After all, she had rooted out two murderers, two kidnappers, and a half a dozen other criminals of varying stripes; but those malefactors had drawn her into their schemes by their own choice, and she had foiled them by necessity, not choice. If she came to harm because she helped him in his efforts to bring Lord Yarbrough to justice, Jones would never forgive himself.”* – M. Honeywell

When Lucas had pondered the possibility of being arrested, he had always assumed the event would occur in one of two places: at the office of his printer, whoever it happened to be at the time, or at his lodgings on Neale Street. He had never once imagined the event would occur at the coffee-house during one of his regular Wednesday engagements with Rahul. But that was exactly how it had happened. He was drinking his second cup and listening with half an ear to his best friend’s enthusiastic, though not at all prurient, description of the delights of the newly married state—a topic he relished barely more than he would a persistent toothache, despite his genuine happiness on Rahul’s behalf—when the tall, graying magistrate appeared in his peripheral vision, accompanied by three bobbies in their conventional blue tails and hats.

He wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or amused by the show of force. Surely they didn’t believe a man whose primary weapon was

words would be capable of putting up an effective resistance to arrest, especially in so public a venue as this. Although, to be fair, they might be more concerned about the reaction of the establishment's other patrons; Peeler's Bloody Gang was hardly revered by the average citizen, after all.

In part to avert any potential violence, Lucas rose to his feet and held his wrists together in front of his body to signal his willingness to be taken into custody. Lord Hornsby's gaunt face twisted into a rictus of displeasure at the gesture. The magistrate had been spoiling for a fight and now that he saw he wasn't going to get one, he wasn't pleased.

His disappointment didn't prevent him from exercising his duty, however. "Lucas Delgado Guerrero," Hornsby intoned with somber glee, "I hereby place you under arrest on the charges of stamp tax evasion and seditious libel."

Curiously, as one of the constables clapped a pair of handcuffs over his proffered wrists, Lucas felt more relieved than worried. After spending the better part of three years with the threat of arrest hanging over his head, the worst had finally happened, and he no longer had to dread that outcome.

“*N*ow, Mr. Guerrero—”

“Delgado,” Lucas corrected with an exasperated sigh. “My surname in English law is Delgado; Guerrero is my mother’s surname.”

Lord Hornsby scowled and muttered, “Bloody Spaniards.” The magistrate, flanked by two policemen, stood just inside the door to the holding cell and looked regally down his nose at his prisoner. “Mr. Delgado, then. Do you understand how serious the charges against you are?”

“I do, your lordship,” he said meekly.

“I am glad to hear that, because I have a proposition that I think you will like. One that will get you out of here today, if you are willing to cooperate.”

An uneasy sensation twisted in Lucas’s gut. Whatever Hornsby wanted from him, he was absolutely *not* going to like it if it would result in his immediate release. “And what is that, milord?”

Hornsby’s grin was almost as menacing as his frown. “Simply reveal the true identity of Polly Dicax, and we will drop all charges against you.”

Lucas stifled a gasp. So that was what they were after. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised; Honora’s articles in these past few weeks had been more critical of the government than ever. With the election of a new, more reform-minded Parliament, the old guard would want to settle scores with its public adversaries before they lost their power to do so. But he still felt as though the wind had been knocked from his lungs, because he couldn’t help but wonder if Hornsby suspected that Lucas and Polly Dicax had a more than professional relationship.

But how could the magistrate suspect that and not already know who Polly Dicax was?

Taking several easy breaths to camouflage his fears, he shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

Hornsby’s fists clenched and a flicker of rage crossed his haughty and elongated features. “I think you’re lying to me, Mr. G—Delgado. Surely you don’t publish the work of complete strangers.”

Except, of course, he *did*. In fact, with the exception of his own articles and the few items submitted by writers whose articles weren’t controversial enough that they felt the need for pseudonyms, almost everything he published was the work of complete strangers whose identities were unknown to him. And up until a few weeks ago, Polly Dicax had been one of those anonymous strangers. Hornsby had some peculiar ideas about the



ins and outs of publishing an illegal newspaper if he thought writers and publishers routinely shared personal information. "I assure you, Lord Hornsby," he said, "that I am as ignorant of the identity of most of the writers I publish as they are of mine. In fact, I imagine very few authors would be willing to submit their work to me if I demanded their true names and addresses, for precisely this reason."

The magistrate took several steps into the small, musty room and bent his face close to Lucas's, a sneer curling his thin lips. "I don't believe you, Mr. Delgado. And if you don't tell me what you know about this enemy of the crown so I can put a stop to his impious, rabble-rousing rants, not only will you be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, but when it is over, whether you are convicted or acquitted, you will be deported to the United States of Mexico."

Lucas had to fight to keep his mouth from betraying his emotions, because the corners wanted to break into a grin. Whatever the outcome of his arrest, Hornsby wasn't even close to penetrating Honora's incognita; the fact that he'd referred to Polly Dicax using the masculine pronoun clearly indicated the man was merely taking shots in the dark, hoping to bully someone into outing the author's identity. Nor did the magistrate have any more reason to suspect Lucas was aware of that identity than any other publisher.

She would be safe. All he had to do was hold his tongue. And accept deportation, a threat Lucas had no doubt the magistrate could and would follow through on.

But would being sent back to Mexico really be such a terrible thing? He ached, sometimes, with memories of his birthplace: of hot sunshine and warm rains, of spicy habanero and sweet sapote, of staring up into starry night skies unobscured by fog and coal dust, and of swinging to sleep in a hammock. He had often contemplated returning, especially after Vicente Guerrero's election to the presidency in 1828. A true hero of the revolution who'd also

possessed native ancestry, Guerrero—no relation, as far as Lucas knew, to his mother—had been a kindred spirit, committed to ending anti-indigenous prejudice and economic injustice in the fledgling Mexican republic.

Alas, it had been too good to last. The corrupt, conservative power structure that remained from the colonial period could not stand for such reforms, and Guerrero had been deposed, captured, and executed just a few months earlier. The engineer of the coup, Anastasio Bustamante, now held the presidency, and conditions were even worse under his rule for the press than they currently were in England. A man of Lucas's talents would have a difficult time earning a living in present-day Mexico without risking not just arrest but execution. Still, he could find a way to survive, especially since he still had family who lived in Merida and its outlying villages.

And if he returned to Mexico, he would never see Honora again. Never kiss her. Never hold her. But he had been resigned to that fate already, hadn't he? Except that, at least while they were living in the same country, they could communicate with one another, albeit furtively and indirectly. If he were in Mexico, though? Everything would be different.

Because while he was in England, there was hope, wasn't there? He had never articulated that hope to himself, but now that he was forced to face the prospect of losing it, he had to admit it was there. The hope that the stamp tax might be reduced or abolished, allowing him to publish legally. The hope that he could one day find another way to fight cruelty and oppression without hiding behind the shield of anonymity. And most of all, the hope that when that time came, Honora would be willing to share her life with him, if not as his wife in the eyes of the law, then as his partner in all other ways.

None of those things was ever going to happen now, though. Neither of his choices would lead to the rosy future of his dreams. Betray her and lose her forever. Protect her and lose her forever.

Lucas looked up at the looming magistrate and shook his head. "I cannot help you, my lord."

"It's maddening, Ormondy. I would swear to you that the man knows Dicax's true identity, but he continues to claim otherwise, even when faced with imprisonment and deportation."

Honora froze mid-step, several feet short of the entrance to the front parlor. She'd been on her way from her room on the third floor to the dining room for tea when the querulous—though slightly muffled—voice had assailed her ears. A voice she felt certain she had heard before, and under similar circumstances, for a closed door had separated her from the speaker then as well. Her heart twisted with sudden, genuine dread, not just because she knew the identity of the man cloistered with her father, but because of what he had just said. *Imprisonment. Deportation.* And worst of all, her secret pseudonym.

There was only one explanation for what she had just overheard. The magistrate had arrested Lucas and was pressuring him to divulge her identity. And Lucas was refusing to do so. Protecting her at the expense of his own liberty and his future ability to call England home.

"I sympathize with your frustration," her father replied, his tone soothing, "but from your previous efforts to unmask Dicax, it seems likely this man genuinely does not know the author's identity. How many of these publishers have you arrested so far to the same results?"

"Five." The magistrate fairly spat the word. "But the tenor of Delgado's denials strikes me as different from the others. He knows more than he is telling. I'm certain of it. Not to mention that he's a foreigner; he has no right to enjoy the fruits of our land while

evading taxes and publicly defaming the crown. I should deport him even if he *does* eventually reveal Dicax to me.”

The twist and roll of Honora’s stomach was so violent that her appetite fled, replaced with a nauseating guilt. She knew exactly which five publishers Hornsby meant. Only one had been able to return to business after paying the steep fines imposed upon them, and to do so, Mr. Pargeter had been forced to replace his radical, reformist material with content that was more favorable to the government, meaning he no longer printed Polly Dicax’s articles.

What she hadn’t known—or even considered as a possibility—was that those publishers had all been arrested not simply because they’d printed articles critical of the government or because they’d failed to pay stamp duty, but because the government specifically wanted to stop *her*. Perhaps she ought to have guessed. Her father had mentioned on more than one occasion that a number of Polly Dicax’s articles had caused great consternation in the halls of Parliament, especially those that defended vigilante actions like the Swing Riots. It was not much of a leap, he had said, from the justification of vandalism and violence to the incitement of such behavior. And if her father, who was amongst the most open-minded and forward-thinking of his colleagues in the House of Lords, felt that way, Honora ought to have realized she was courting charges of seditious libel. The only reason she had been able to ignore the possibility was that no one knew—until Lucas, at any rate—who Polly Dicax was or where to find her. As a result, her publishers had taken the risks for her, with grave consequences.

How utterly selfish and self-absorbed she had been to imagine that what she had to say was so vital and unique, it was worth other people’s lives and livelihoods! Yes, Polly Dicax was popular and sold papers, but that didn’t make her carelessness or ignorance any more acceptable.

“That decision is up to you, of course,” her father said, “but I do think you ought to keep your promises, lest future witnesses learn you can’t be trusted and decide not to cooperate with you.”

The magistrate grunted in acquiescence. "I do have one more means of applying pressure to Mr. Delgado, but I felt I needed to consult you before I attempted it. There might be...repercussions that could affect members of your family."

Honora's head became light, and for the first time in her life, she thought she might actually faint. What did Lord Hornsby know—or think he knew—that could possibly affect the Pearces, since he obviously did not even suspect she was Polly Dicax?

Placing a hand on the nearest wall to steady herself, she forced herself to breathe evenly and quietly and listened.

"In what way?" Her father clearly had no better idea than she what the magistrate was talking about.

"Delgado's father works in the Foreign Office as a translator. From what I have heard, the senior Señor Delgado works closely with your brother and his skills are considered highly valuable, since he is fluent not only in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French but also several of the native tongues of Mexico."

*Oh. Oh, no.* Honora could predict where this was going.

Her father did, too. "You mean to threaten to deport Mr. Delgado's father as well as himself?" he guessed.

"Along with his mother. I understand she is a native, although she also claims descent from Gonzalo Guerrero, a Spaniard who fought against Cortes and is quite a folk hero amongst the lower and indigenous classes. Having just deposed and executed another Guerrero who was popular with the natives, I doubt Bustamante would be kindly disposed to any of the Delgados were they to return."

Honora pressed her hand to a stomach. This was even worse than she had imagined. Lord Hornsby was all but declaring he would see to it not only that Lucas and his family were returned to Mexico against their will, but he would make sure the current president would be informed of their backgrounds and sympathies. She knew very little about the political situation in Mexico; it had never occurred to her to pay particular attention to events in a

place that was a continent away and formerly under Spanish rather than British rule, but she could deduce that conditions at present would be unwelcoming, if not life-threatening, to those with reformist views.

Surely Lucas must know that any penalty she, the daughter of an earl who wielded a tremendous amount of power in Parliament, might face for her crimes would be as nothing compared to what could happen to him and his parents if they were deported. In fact, she felt a rising fury in her breast that he had protected her even this far. Having her identity exposed would be inconvenient and unpleasant, but she was unlikely to suffer serious repercussions.

At the same time, she was profoundly moved by his willingness to make such a sacrifice. Her previous publishers could not have revealed her to Hornsby; none of them had ever had any idea who Polly Dicax was. Lucas did, yet he chose to pretend he did not, because her safety meant more to him than his own. Because he loved her.

As she loved him.

The time to stop cowering in the shadows had arrived. And now that it had, Honora could not for the life of her imagine why she had been hiding at all. She was not ashamed of anything she had written. Every word she penned sprang from her belief in the rights of all human beings—of every sex, every class, every color, and every national origin—to freedom, fair treatment, a decent livelihood, and equal justice. Moreover, these were ideals she had learned at her father's knee; perhaps she had expanded upon what he had taught and modeled, but deep down, she could not believe he truly disagreed with her opinions or would punish her for expressing them, even if he didn't approve.

Straightening her shoulders, she strode forward and opened the door to the parlor. "If you are looking for Polly Dicax," she said as she advanced into the room, "look no further, my Lord Hornsby. For here I am."

## Chapter Sixteen

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*“Of all the tangled webs we weave, those we create through deceiving ourselves are the most intricate and difficult to unwind.” – Polly*

Dicax

“We are—we *were*—lovers.”

This was the most challenging of all the admissions Honora had made to her parents since Lord Hornsby’s angry departure—without his quarry in custody—a half hour earlier. Her face heated with embarrassment, not because she regretted anything that had passed between her and Lucas in those blissful hours, but because she felt very certain her parents would be shocked and horrified by such behavior outside the bonds of marriage.

But to her astonishment, her father and mother exchanged what could only be described as a “knowing look,” and suddenly, her embarrassment was less about her own actions and more about the uncomfortable revelation that her parents probably hadn’t been any more circumspect before they’d married than she had. She could imagine it of her mother, who had never cared a fig for notions of propriety, but her father was such a paragon of gentlemanly virtue and restraint that Honora found herself shaken by the revelation that he likely hadn’t waited to exchange vows before taking her mother to his bed. And yet...the heat that flashed in his eyes when he looked at her mother had always been a wild and unruly thing. Honora had just never truly understood it until she’d experienced that feeling for herself.

“I see,” the Earl of Ormondy said, his voice as calm as if she had just informed him she preferred her tea with one sugar rather than two. “And I take it from this that you care for Mr. Delgado?”

Honora poured steel into her spine and met her father’s eyes without flinching. “I love him. We only agreed not to see one another because he knew he was in danger of being arrested and he did not wish me to suffer any repercussions of his actions.”

“He clearly returns your feelings.” Her mother’s brisk observation was tinged with satisfaction. “The solution seems obvious, does it not, my dears?”

Her jaw slackening, Honora glanced from her father to her mother in incredulity. “You cannot mean you think I should marry him.”

The countess frowned in the way that had always made all her children squirm, because it conveyed her deep disappointment in whatever it was they had just said or done. Disappointing Winifred Langston was a thousand times more distressing than making her angry. Her anger was a flash, like a firework, and the smoke dissipated quickly. Her disappointment was a cloud that could settle over the household for weeks. The expression still worked on Honora, and she had to exert an effort of will to keep from wriggling in her chair.

“Whyever not?” her mother asked. “You love him, and he loves you. What possible reason could we have to object to your happiness?”

Honora opened her mouth to list all the reasons her parents *ought* to have to oppose her marrying Lucas Delgado—his class, his lack of wealth, his foreign birth, his native Mexican heritage—and then closed it again. Every one of them was founded in the very prejudice and condescension that allowed the aristocracy to disdain the commoner, the rich to denigrate the poor, and the pale-skinned natives of this tiny island to believe themselves naturally superior to the darker-skinned inhabitants of the places they had colonized. Did she honestly believe her parents were so narrow-minded and



arrogant as that? She had not, after all, arrived at her principles regarding the equality of all human beings by mere accident. No, her ideals were part and parcel of her upbringing, of her mother's merry example of flouting conventions and her father's reluctantly amused pleasure in them, and of her extended family's constant efforts to combat injustice and make the world a better place.

"Well," she said after several long seconds of imitating a fish, "he *has* broken the law regarding the payment of stamp duty."

"The current duty is akin to highway robbery," her father declared with some relish. "Among the many things Lord Grey wishes to change once the Reform Act has passed and we have a more favorable Parliament. But in the meanwhile, one can hardly blame a man for refusing to allow the government to pick his pockets."

"But I—I—" Honora stammered, her mind racing too fast for her to put her jumbled thoughts into words. She loved Lucas, but that didn't change the fact that as a married woman, she would cease to be her own person in the eyes of the law. Yes, she had thought that Lucas would make some woman a good husband. She had even flirted with the thought that this woman could be her, if she wanted.

But marriage under current English law remained anathema to her. How could she rail against wedlock as an institution while voluntarily entering into it? The fact that *Lucas* was a good man, that he loved her, that he would never use or abuse her as the law allowed did not change anything. The law was still wrong.

"You never meant to marry," the countess observed without reproach. "Because it is another form of highway robbery that ought to be abolished."

Honora stared at her mother, dumbfounded. "How—how did you know?"

"Well," she said with a tinkling laugh, "I have read my share of Polly Dicax's articles on the subject. Moreover, I quite agree with them."

“But you would encourage me to marry, anyway.”

Her mother shrugged. “You have noticed, have you not, that *I* married?”

“Well, yes, but—”

But her parents’ marriage was different. Her mother was the daughter of a viscount, her father the son of an earl. Moreover, the countess had never made her own living or faced the possibility of being bankrupted by a spendthrift husband; the earl was too profligate as clear skies were to rain. There was little inherent danger in such a union. Her parents were well-matched, evenly yoked.

And her stomach churned at the realization that she was committing every sin of prejudice and condescension she railed against. By God, she was as infected with the disease as any of her fellow countrymen; she’d only fooled herself that she knew better.

She loved Lucas because she knew, instinctively and deeply, that she could trust him with her safety, with her ambitions, and with her heart. He would never crush her spirit, never envy her successes, never put her in harm’s way. And he had more than proved that last, hadn’t he? If she could not rely on Lucas, there was no one on earth in whom she could have any confidence at all, not even her own family.

Her father read her expression. “That’s settled, then.” Rising from his chair, he brushed imaginary dust from the front of his clothes. “I’ll go see your husband released from custody directly.”

Honora blinked. “My husband? But...he isn’t my husband. Not yet, anyway.”

The Earl of Ormondy grinned. “By the time I get there, he will be, at least as far as the law is concerned.”

“But...how? And why?”

“Don’t think too much about how,” her father said with a chuckle. “It won’t be entirely above board.” Leaning down, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “As to why, the answer is that while I have the power to ensure Mr. Delgado is never prosecuted

on any of the charges against him, I cannot prevent him from being deported. Not unless I can provide an unassailable reason for his continued presence in this country, and marriage to a British citizen—and in particular, *my* daughter—is one of the few rationales I can present that are likely to hold sway.

“In order for my petition to succeed, however, you and Mr. Delgado must appear to be *already* be married, not merely engaged. Even a formal betrothal might not be sufficient to sway the court. And that means we shall all have to pretend you and he have been married for some time now, and you have only now made me aware of the fact.”

“And how will you make anyone believe that?” Honora asked, mystified. “As if I could get married without you and Mama being any the wiser!”

“I expect,” her mother said wryly, “your Uncle Walter is about to learn that not only did you visit his family this past Christmas-tide, but that they allowed you to gallivant off to Scotland for a few days and get yourself married.” The countess shot her husband a shrewd gaze. “Have I got that about right, Con?”

Straightening, the earl executed a quick bow in his wife’s direction before waggling his eyebrows. “It is truly remarkable how well you know me, my dear.”

“Indeed. After thirty-five years, I can still count on you to hang my brother out to dry.”

He shrugged, his eyes twinkling with merriment. “What is the use of having a vicar in the family if one cannot take advantage of his sterling character and reputation?” Turning back to his daughter, he said, “But you must be certain you want me to do this.”

Honora did her best to quell the sudden spike of alarm that assailed her. If her father succeeded in convincing the authorities she and Lucas had been married for nearly six months, there could be no going back. Should she agree to this course of action, she would be Lucas’s wife—for better or worse and until death parted

them—without ever having spoken a single vow. The time to say no, then, was now. She would have no future opportunity.

Her stomach vaulted and rolled. Once this was done, Lucas would have complete control of every farthing she had ever and would ever earn. He could abandon or abuse her, and she would not be able to prevent him. Should he choose to commit adultery, whether once or a thousand times, the only response available to her would be forbearance. And if he decided he did not want her to work, did not want her to write, then she would have to abide by his wishes.

She closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath. These were fears she might reasonably have about another man. But not Lucas. Not the man whose fair, insightful, and—above all—compassionate essays she had read and admired for years. Not the man who had made love to her with so much passion yet leavened with such tenderness and care, nor the one with whom she had exchanged those chapters of *Persephone White* that showed the heroine through the eyes of an utterly devoted hero. And certainly not the man who now risked imprisonment and deportation for her sake.

Opening her eyes, she met her father's concerned gaze and nodded firmly. "Yes, Papa. I want you to do this."

## Chapter Seventeen

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*“Even in gaol, where every prisoner is extorted shamelessly for access to the barest of necessities, the rich man fares better than the poor regardless of the nature of his crime.” – Luke Evangelista*

As Lucas mounted the stairs to the front door of 12 Clifford

Street, he recalled standing on the pavement just weeks ago, staring at this house in forlorn certainty that he would never be worthy to enter its respectable if not-quite-hallowed halls. Never in his wildest imaginings had he considered the possibility that not only would he be invited within, but would do so as a member of the family. Yet here he was, walking a few steps behind the Earl of Ormondy, his *father-in-law*—and by all the gods and all the signs, how was *that* even possible?—on his way to join his *wife*.

Honora. His wife.

His head still swam with the implications.

The earl neither opened the door nor knocked upon it. Instead, he simply reached the portal and it opened for him so he barely had to break his stride. Once inside, the earl handed his hat over to the footman—who must have been watching from a nearby window for his master’s arrival—and beckoned Lucas to do the same.

With no small degree of chagrin, Lucas gave the servant his decidedly battered and, after nearly two days in Newgate, distinctly odoriferous hat. The footman evinced not the slightest disapproval of the condition of this or any other article of Lucas’s clothing, as though the Ormondys routinely welcomed recently released inmates

into their home.

“Lewis,” the earl addressed the footman, “this is Mr. Delgado, Lady Honora’s husband.”

“Good evening, sir,” said the servant, as if Lucas did not look and smell a fright.

In the warm glow of the chandelier that lit the entrance hall, Lucas saw that a staircase leading upward to the first floor hugged the right wall and another long, narrow corridor led to the remainder of the ground floor, with one visible opening on the left. He glanced up, hoping Honora might appear at the top of the staircase and somehow make this whole exchange less awkward.

But he was not so blessed. He would just have to muddle through.

The footman gave Lucas’s hat a thoughtful look and asked, “Would you like me to have the hall boy clean this?”

Lucas half grinned, half grimaced. “I think we’d do better to burn it, don’t you, my lord?” The same could be said of his clothes. He doubted the smell could ever be got out.

His father-in-law chuckled good-naturedly. The earl was considerably less daunting a figure in person than he was made out to be in the press. “That would probably be for the best.” Then he gestured to the stairs. “The ladies will be waiting for us in the rear sitting room.”

Stifling the urge to ask how many sitting rooms one family required, Lucas nodded and took the lead as the earl apparently wished him to do. At the top of the flight of stairs, another well-lit corridor stretched in front of him with doors to his left. Since Ormondy had called it the *rear sitting room*, Lucas walked past the first of these doors without pausing to inquire, but slowed as he neared the second, the question unspoken but clearly understood when the earl said, “Not this one. The next.”

With a nod, Lucas continued to the third door—all of which had multiple recessed panels and were painted white with gilt trim that matched the white paneled and gilt-trimmed ceiling—and turned

the knob. In other circumstances, he supposed he might have taken a few seconds to examine the decoration and furnishings, but he had eyes for only one occupant of the room.

As the door opened, Honora shot from a chaise longue as though she had been poised to do so even before their arrival. A dull thud heralded a book hitting the colorful rug—Turkish? Persian? Lucas was no judge of such things—and she flew toward him in a flutter of yards of silvery-white fabric, her hair hanging loose and long about her shoulders.

He hadn't seen her in more than a month, and the sight of her practically stopped his heart. She was as lovely as he remembered—no, even more so. It wasn't just the arrangement of her features that made her beautiful, but something more incandescent, more insubstantial. He wasn't sure if he had forgot or failed to fully appreciate the overwhelming audacity of her, the way she threw herself into both the joys and the dangers of life.

The current danger being his ungodly stench.

But he had no opportunity to warn her off before she had wrapped him in a fervent embrace, her face buried in the junction of his neck and shoulder. He felt a dampness he suspected was tears and despite the certainty that he was ruining a very expensive dressing gown, he enfolded her in his arms.

"I'm all right, my love," he whispered. "It's over now."

They stood this way for quite some time before she wriggled free and stepped away from him. Her eyes were a soft, gossamer gray, more like down than the steel he was accustomed to seeing there, but her wrinkled nose indicated she had gotten more than a whiff of his *eau du prison*—a combination, he knew, of human and rodent waste, rotting food, and fetid water. She looked from him to her father. "You could have warned me, you know."

"Would it have made a difference?" the earl asked.

"No," she admitted easily, returning her gaze to Lucas. Her eyes drank him in as if she were dying of thirst and he might turn out to be a mirage. "But I might have taken my favorite wrapper off first."

The other occupant of the room rose from her chair, which faced away from the door, and turned to give the three of them—Lucas, Honora, and her father—an appraising once-over. The Countess of Ormondy stood no more than five feet tall and possessed a slender figure, but she was a compact person rather than a small one, for her presence and attention took up as much space in the room as her physically more imposing husband. Lucas could see the resemblance between her and her daughter in the shape of their eyes and the curve of their lips, as well as in the barely leashed vivacity that exuded from both his beloved and his mother-in-law.

“You could have warned *me*,” the countess said to her husband, in not-entirely-mock reproof. “I could have had the bath made ready before you arrived. Now the servants will have to be got out of bed, and our poor son-in-law will have to wait another thirty minutes or more before he can be got clean.” Her voice, Lucas noticed, was so similar in cadence and register to Honora’s that he could almost believe she had spoken rather than the elegant matron in front of him.

“My apologies, my love,” the earl responded, sounding genuinely contrite. “I thought they were still holding him at the police station in Holborn, which is considerably less putrid than Newgate. Had I known...”

She emitted a mollified huff, cutting off her husband’s apology in midsentence, and addressed herself to Lucas. “Welcome to the family, Mr. Delgado. I know the circumstances are irregular, but I suspect you will find us a most irregular bunch.”

Lucas arched his eyebrows. Even after everything the earl had told him before his release, Lucas could not quite credit his own ears. If he were not certain his own imagination would never concoct a scenario in which he not only married Lady Honora Pearce but was taken into the bosom of her family without resentment or recrimination, he would suspect he was dreaming. Even now, he had the nagging apprehension that he was being played for a fool in some way. It all just seemed too good to be true.



“Thank you, my lady,” was all he could think to say, and the words came out tinged with a certain degree of wariness.

The countess smiled broadly, and this too he recognized as identical to his wife’s. His *wife*. Would he ever get used to that?

“I think you had best call me Freddie, at least in private. Otherwise, I shall feel like a terrible old stick in the mud.”

Lucas nodded and wondered how on earth he would manage such familiarity with this formidable, though plainly kind and good-humored, woman.

Now, to his relief, she turned her attention to Honora. “I’ll have Nicks bring one of your papa’s dressing gowns to your room so your husband can get out of those clothes before the bath is prepared.” She made a shooping motion with both hands. “One of the footmen will come up and knock on your door when the bathing chamber is ready.”

Honora, who had been following the conversation with obvious wonderment, if not open incredulity, blinked at her mother’s pronouncement. “You...you mean for me to take Lucas to my room? Alone?”

“He is your husband, my dear. If you don’t behave as if he is, there may be questions, and we can’t afford that.”

*T*he first order of business when they arrived in Honora’s suite—which certainly could *not* be called her room, since there were fully three separate spaces: a sitting room, a dressing room, and the bedchamber itself—was to remove his stinking garments. This Lucas accomplished in the privacy of the dressing room while Honora waited in the sitting room for the delivery of the promised robe.

Once he was naked, he could almost bear to be in his own

presence, but there was still an underlying reek that clung to his skin, as though Newgate had seeped not just into the fabric of his clothes but into his very pores. He shuddered as images—visual, auditory, and olfactory—of the time he'd spent behind bars rushed through his brain. Despite the fact that he had visited the prison on several occasions during the time he'd been training as a barrister, conditions at the prison were far worse than he had appreciated. This, he now understood, was because the clients he had visited, being wealthy enough to retain representation, were also wealthy enough to be housed in Newgate's more genteel sections. Men of his modest means did not fare nearly so well. Poorer men likely fared even worse.

Yet another injustice for him to rail against although, thanks to his new station in life, his arguments might fall on ears with the actual power to effect change, not merely agitate for it.

A gentle knock sounded on the door before it opened, and Honora slipped into the small but exceptionally well-lit space. She had removed the diaphanous peignoir he'd undoubtedly sullied—hopefully not beyond saving—and wore only a white cotton nightgown. Given that it covered her from neck to ankles, the garment should have appeared demure, even chaste, but in the bright illumination, the fabric was all but transparent, displaying every sumptuous curve of her body.

The longing he'd managed to tamp down in her parents' presence swelled to life, his cock stretching and thickening with pent-up arousal. She gazed back at him with undisguised heat in her eyes, studying his naked form with a hunger that matched his own. His first instinct was to close the short distance between them and kiss her. Then he remembered that not only did he need a bath, he had not been able to avail himself of a toothbrush for two full days, and his breath was probably even fouler than his skin. Also, he noticed the dark blue material that hung over her arm and realized this was the promised dressing gown.

As if she had also just recalled why she had come, Honora

dragged her eyes back to his face and held out the robe to him.

Taking the proffered item from her grasp, he discovered that it was made of brocaded silk studded with golden threads. He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure you want me to wear *this*?”

She shrugged. “It’s what Newsome, my father’s valet, sent. I’m sure he has a dozen others to choose from.”

And there again was the reminder of the chasm that lay between them. Lucas had not been raised in penury—to the contrary, his father’s position paid well, and his parents lived in solid middle-class comfort—but neither could he get his mind around the notion of having so many expensive garments that any of them could be considered disposable.

Even as he drew on the robe, he felt an oppressive weight compressing his chest. Honora might be the most unspoiled child of wealth and privilege he had ever known, but he did not know if she fully grasped what she had given up by marrying him. As the wife of a commoner—and a foreign one, to boot—she would never be accepted as a true member of the aristocratic circles she’d grown up in. Her immediate family would not cut her, of that he was sure, but her friends and more distant relations were unlikely to invite her to society functions, and some might go so far as to snub her directly. Of course, it was patronizing of him to think she *didn’t* understand these things—she was more conversant with the pretensions and prejudices of the Upper Ten Thousand than he would ever be—but he couldn’t help but worry she might one day regret the change in her circumstances and come to resent him.

It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out his fears, but what he said instead was, “Dare I hope there is an unused toothbrush and some toothpowder to be had?”

There was.

By the time he had finished thoroughly cleaning and rinsing his mouth, another servant had arrived to indicate that his bath was ready and waiting for him in the basement room reserved for this purpose. Honora led him down the front stairs and to the door off

the ground-floor hallway that concealed the flight of steps to the lowest level of the house. The bathing chamber was located at the rear of the house, where another set of steps provided access to the basement from the kitchen.

Upon entering the room, which measured perhaps nine feet square, Lucas saw first a boat-shaped cast-iron tub in the center, from which steam curled in wispy tendrils, and then the side table upon which were laid multiple towels, a rack upon which to hang clothing, and a sturdy chair beside a freestanding oval mirror.

Honora followed him in and closed the door. "Get in," she said and pulled her nightdress off over her head.

## Chapter Eighteen

❧

*“Love was not blind, Persephone realized; it was the lens through which one finally apprehended truth.” – M. Honeywell*

She'd managed to take him by surprise, Honora knew. Lucas blinked at her in mute astonishment for several seconds, as though the possibility that she would join him in the tub had never occurred to him. But she was not prepared to let this opportunity go to waste. Nor was she willing to wait one instant longer than absolutely necessary to touch him, to kiss him, to assure herself that he wanted her and this hastily effected lifelong bond as much as she did.

Down here in the basement, no one would hear them, not even the servants, for they would not come back to empty the water and tidy the bath chamber until morning. Down here, she and Lucas could be alone together without the threat of a well-intentioned interruption by one of her parents or—worse yet—both of them. And while her mother and father unquestionably wanted the *servants* to believe Lucas was her husband, she was not convinced they would truly believe it until the actual wedding vows had been exchanged.

To his credit, her husband—*her husband!*—did not hesitate for long before shedding his robe to reveal his deeply tanned skin and sinewy frame. A shiver of pleasure spiraled through her limbs at the sight of his cock, which grew and stiffened as though she stroked it with her eyes. A rush of liquid heat pooled between her thighs, slick

and insistent.

With a quick grin as wolfish as it was playful, Lucas stepped into the tub and, with a relieved groan, sat down and stretched out his legs, submerging all but his head and shoulders beneath the steaming water. “Gods, this feels good,” he muttered thickly.

Honora retrieved the bar of soap from the side table and, after dipping her hands to wet them, rubbed it between her hands to form a lather. Then she rested her hip on the side of tub and began to wash his chest and shoulders. He made another guttural sound of contentment and closed his eyes. She continued her task, coaxing him to lean forward so she could reach his upper back and work her way down his arms. Perhaps she ought to have been cold, since she was naked and the room was not heated, but a languorous warmth spread beneath her skin.

Finally, she observed, “You always say ‘gods,’ plural. Never ‘God,’ singular. Do you believe in more than one?”

Cracking one eyelid, he said, “A bit late to worry you’ve married a heathen, isn’t it?”

“I’m not worried,” she assured him. “Just curious.”

He opened both eyes now and looked up at her thoughtfully. “Honestly, I’ve never much thought about it. My parents are practicing Catholics, of course, but my mother still very much believes in the gods of her ancestors. She just thinks they’re subservient to—or perhaps aspects of, I’m not entirely sure which—the big ‘G’ god, and equates them to Catholic saints. But while she’s firm enough in her Catholicism that I could never have gotten away with taking the Lord’s name in vain, she had no problem with me swearing by little ‘g’ gods, so I suppose that’s why I do it.”

Cupping her hands, she sluiced water over his shoulders to rinse away the lather. “I suppose that makes sense. Will your parents mind very much, do you think?”

“Mind what?”

“This.” She gestured between the two of them. “Us. After all, I’m Protestant, and you’re Catholic. They might reasonably dislike me,

especially given the way Catholics have been treated by the English government over the centuries. And then there's the fact that you will have to tell them we married in secret. I should think they might be put out about that, if nothing else."

He chuckled and shook his head. "They will be thrilled. As far as they are concerned, I should have married years ago and provided them with a few grandchildren by now." His expression sobered. "Speaking of which...you never wanted to marry at all, yet here we are. How do you feel about children?"

Startled by the sudden turn in the conversation, Honora stilled. How *did* she feel about children? She *liked* them or, at least, she had no particular opposition to being in their presence. Several of her older cousins had children, and she enjoyed seeing and spending time with them, but she had never given much thought to whether or not she wanted any. As Lucas's question implied, there had never been any need.

Until now.

She bit her lip. "I don't know," she admitted. "I suppose you want them very much, though."

Reaching up with a warm, wet hand, he caressed her face. "I want you more than I want hypothetical offspring. If you prefer not to have children, we will take what measures we can to prevent it, although—" and here his voice dropped a half an octave and his eyes turned smoky, "—given how often I hope to engage with you for the rest of our lives in the activity that results in them, I cannot guarantee we won't have any."

The rough timbre of his words rolled over her skin like a caress, turning her nipples hard as pebbles and stoking the achy pulse between her thighs. "I want you just as much. And just as often. I want you now."

"Then join me." He gave her arm a slight tug and eased her into the tub so she lay atop and facing him.

The water was still warm enough to prickle, and the blatant pressure of his erection against her stomach raised her internal

temperature from hot to scorching. Perversely, she shivered.

“Cold?” he asked gently.

She shook her head. “Quite the opposite.”

“Good.” Framing her face with his hands, he adjusted his position against the back of the tub and brought her lips to his.

They were starved for each other, tongues and teeth colliding in a heady, erotic rush. He tasted of cinnamon and oranges—the result of her tooth powder, she thought distantly—and of pure, profane need. His hands roamed her body with relentless purpose, as though he feared she might evaporate like so much mist and smoke.

After more than a month of separation, all of it spent in the certainty that they would never be together again, she understood his anxiety, even shared it. How many times in these weeks had she lain in bed, touching herself while she’d imagined her fingers were Lucas’s fingers and the heavy blankets atop her were Lucas’s body, pressing her into the mattress? Too many to count. Now here he was, in the flesh, and not just hers for a few stolen hours but for the rest of their lives. The possibility that this might all be a dream was difficult to dismiss.

Her fantasies were never this vivid, this solid. She couldn’t deny the reality of his soft, slippery-wet skin and his firm, supple muscles and, most of all, the hard, thick length of his cock, which seemed to pulse with a life of its own, seeking, yearning.

“I want to be inside you,” he murmured against her mouth, not quite breaking the kiss.

Lust swelled in her belly, throbbed between her legs. “Yes, please.”

His hands cupped the backs of her thighs and urged them apart until she straddled him, her knees resting on the smooth iron bottom of the tub. Grasping her hips, he lifted her, positioning her so the head of his cock rested at her entrance. “As slow or as fast as you wish, querida.”

He was giving her complete control of this union, and a fresh burst of feverish desire coursed through her veins. Her first impulse



was for fast, but as she lowered herself onto his shaft, she realized the fit was snuggler than she had anticipated. Eager and ready as she was, her quim was too tight for her to slide down on him in one easy motion. Her frustration was soon tempered, however, by the glorious sensation of filling herself with him, inch by gradual, delicious inch. As she took him, she studied his face and reveled in the clench of his jaw, the flutter of his eyelids, and the sheen of perspiration that dampened his forehead.

He smiled up at her, the expression part joy, part agony. "I thought never being with you like this again would kill me. Now, I wonder if the opposite is true."

She couldn't keep from laughing, and he grimaced before joining her. Their laughter faded, however, when he settled his hands on her hips and thrust upward, completing their union. The aching tension of an impending climax coiled tighter as their bodies bumped, and she grabbed onto his biceps to steady herself.

Movement. What she needed was movement. When they'd done this before, Lucas had been the one driving into her, but now their positions were reversed. It was challenging at first, in the limited confines of the tub, but soon she had the hang of it, raising and lowering herself onto him. Fucking him instead of the other way around. The thought was wicked and exciting.

Her release remained just out of reach, however, until he said through gritted teeth, "Use your fingers the way you would if you were alone."

Oh. Flushing—not so much with shyness as with arousal—she slid two digits over the spot and rubbed just there. *Oh!*

Pleasure rocketed through her, and she made a low, hungry sound in her throat. Lucas slipped his hands beneath her bottom and held her in place, thrusting up into her, deep and steady. She closed her eyes, riding the wave higher and higher, dimly aware of the water sloshing over the rim of the tub and not caring.

Suddenly, she knew what she wanted. What she *needed*. "Come with me," she whispered. "Come inside me."

His rhythm faltered. “But—”

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his to stop his protest. She knew what he was going to say: if he spilled without withdrawing, she might conceive; they had not settled the issue of whether that was a risk she wished to take. “It’s all right,” she said. “I want your child.”

“Our child,” he corrected, his voice thick.

“Yes. *Ours*.”

They moved together now with a single purpose, and when she tipped over the precipice into rapture, Lucas’s rough groan and shuddering frame joined hers.

*Ours, indeed.*

Lucas held her for a long time afterward, unwilling to shatter the bubble of contentment that surrounded them. There were still so many questions to be asked, so many issues to be discussed, but it was easy to believe, in the aftermath of their lovemaking, that none of those things mattered.

At long last, however, the cooling water forced him to stir. “We should get out,” he said. “Before we catch our death of cold.”

Honora sighed reluctantly but nodded.

By virtue of being on top, she had to clamber out of the tub first. Although the top of her head remained dry, her hair was wet from the neck down and clung in ringlets to her back and shoulders. Droplets of water beaded onto her skin and glided over her plump breasts and along her torso before plopping back into the water like fat summer raindrops. She was so beautiful, and he had been so certain he would never her again—let alone hold her in his arms—that he wanted to drag her back onto his lap and verify that she was real and not a figment of his imagination.

What stopped him was not any exercise of willpower, but the fact that once their bodies were no longer touching, he realized the water was not merely tepid, but downright cold. Thus motivated, he sprang to his feet as soon as she cleared the tub while she crossed to the sideboard and grabbed two towels from the stack. They were sparkling white and made from fluffy, looped Turkish cotton. Lucas knew exactly how expensive such items were, because he had bought a pair for his mother, who had *oohed* and *aahed* over the quality and texture of the fabric whenever she'd encountered the luxurious linens in a draper's shop but had dismissed them as an extravagance. His mother had been simultaneously delighted and horrified by the gift, and he'd had to pretend he'd got them at a significant discount to assuage her concerns over the cost of two.

The Ormondys had three stacks of them, each piled four or five high. And there were probably more in the laundry.

The unease that had been building in him since the earl's arrival at Newgate reached a new crest as Lucas took the towel from Honora's outstretched hand and began to dry himself off. No, not unease; the feeling was guilt. And he needed to confess. Repent. Atone.

"I owe you an apology," he said.

Honora, who was in the process of squeezing water from her hair with her towel, looked at him with wide, surprised eyes. "Whatever for?"

"For..." Grimacing, he shook his head, irritated by his inability to distill the source of his shame into words. "For everything I did that led to this marriage."

"Everything *you* did?" she repeated, clearly dumbfounded. "I practically bullied you into becoming my lover, and you think *you* are the one whose actions brought us here?"

"I could have refused. Should have." Before she could start the objection he knew hovered on her lips, he continued, "But it's not just that. Or even primarily that. We could have been lovers and remained so, quite safely, if I'd just been willing to give up

publishing *The Weekly Disciple*. Instead, I put my bloody newspaper ahead of you.” He snorted in self-derision. “I don’t understand why you didn’t just leave me to rot.”

His gut twisted as he waited for her response. For her justifiable anger. For the recriminations he so richly deserved.

“I see,” she said slowly.

Her voice was so neutral, so devoid of emotion that he felt a spike of dread. Fury he could accept. Deserved, in fact. But indifference? That he did not know how to handle. Ice filled his veins.

“I wonder,” she continued in that same, measured tone, “what you would have done for income if you’d given up publishing *The Weekly Disciple*.”

Why did that matter? But he thought, despite her seeming indifference, that the answer was important to her. “I could have gone back to practicing law.”

“Which you told me you hated.”

“Yes,” he admitted. But he would have done it for her. Should have.

“So you’re telling me you think I would be happier if you had gone back to doing a job that made you despise your life? That I would just merrily go about my life while you made yourself miserable on my behalf?”

He blinked, a different tendril of shame curling in his chest. “When you put it that way...”

Dropping her towel into a wicker basket next to the sideboard, she crossed the short distance between them and cupped his face between her hands. Her palms were slightly damp but surprisingly warm and very soft. “Lucas, I love you. And one of the reasons I do is because you are so determined to make the world a kinder, fairer place. I would never ask you to abandon that pursuit, especially if you felt that what you had to do instead would actually cause harm.” Her piercing gray eyes searched his face, and she must have seen something in his expression that warned her. She slid her

hands down to his shoulders and frowned. "Of course, my father made you promise to stop publishing *The Weekly Disciple*, didn't he?"

A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips. "Not exactly. He asked me not to publish without paying the stamp duties, but given the math, it's essentially the same thing. I can't raise the price without losing most of my readers, and I can't even cover the production costs without raising the price."

"And you think *I* should be angry with *you*?" Her nostrils flared with indignation. "You've had to give up your life's work on my behalf. Well, I won't stand for it. We'll find a way to pay the duties. We'll use my savings if w—"

He stopped her tirade with a kiss. It was the only sensible thing to do. She squirmed briefly, a halfhearted attempt to escape, but the effort only brought their bodies in closer, more delicious contact and with a soft sigh of surrender, she melted into him. When he finally managed to drag his mouth away from hers again, they were both breathing fast and his cock was standing at attention. But he needed to explain things, not simply succumb to the desire to have her.

Taking her hand, he sat on the sturdy wooden chair behind him and, after making a minor adjustment to his anatomy, pulled her onto his lap. "Querida, your father also offered me gainful employment."

She drew back, eying him dubiously. The expression was probably intended more for her father than for Lucas, however. "Doing what?"

He hesitated before responding, because he was certain what he had to tell her would wound her. "Your father wants me to write papers to help advance reformist legislation and policies. He also suggested I might write speeches for him and possibly for Lord Grey."

As he spoke, Honora's back stiffened. The barb, however unintentional, had hit home. "He asked *you*?" *Instead of me.*

The pang in Lucas's chest at the pain in her voice made his breath catch. And he didn't know how to explain away the slight. The Earl of Ormondy had a daughter who was every bit as capable and competent as Lucas was, but he had not offered *her* the position. And he'd had plenty of opportunity to do so over the years. "I suspect," Lucas said after a beat, "that he knows he is hiring both of us. He can hardly imagine I won't ask for your advice and assistance, after all. Not when he knows we both contributed to your voter's guide and that we've been collaborating on *Persephone White* for the past month."

She huffed, then sniffled and gave him a tremulous smile. "And he could hardly hire his own daughter to a paid position in government. Especially now that everyone is going to find out I am Polly Dicax, enemy of the Crown."

"Another outcome I could have prevented if I'd been less selfish," Lucas pointed out regretfully. "I've cost you your life's work every bit as much as you've cost me mine."

Before he finished speaking, however, Honora clapped her palms over her ears and sang, "La-la-la, I'm not listening."

The intentional silliness of the gesture made him choke out a laugh. "Very well. I'll stop flagellating myself."

Lowering her hands, she leaned her head into the crook of his neck. "It is all rather ironic, though, isn't it? We wound up causing the very things we were trying to avoid."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "If the compensation is a lifetime with you, it is more than worth the cost to me. But I wouldn't blame you if you didn't agree."

With a snort of amusement, she glared up at him in mock reproach and gestured at the tub. "After *that*, you think I have anything to complain about?"

"*That* does not require marriage," he pointed out archly. "Moreover, your reasons for not wanting to marry were reasonable. I hope you don't come to resent that you were forced into it."

"No one could have forced me to do anything I didn't want to.

Besides, I chose to marry *you*,” she said, poking her index finger into the center of his chest, “not some hypothetical suitor who might turn out to be cruel or dishonest. And *you*,” she said and poked him again, “were willing to risk prison and deportation for my sake. I love you. I trust you, which is all that matters.”

Lucas inhaled his first easy breath in days. Raising her fingers to his mouth, he kissed each digit in turn. “I will never give you reason to doubt.”

## Epilogue

❧

*“If all good things must come to an end, then so must all the bad ones. But just because the past year has seen the abolition of slavery in all British territories and regulations preventing the employment of child laborers under nine years of age—two patent evils—this is no time to rest. Until all bondage, all cruelty, all oppression, all injustice everywhere is eradicated, there remains work to do.”* – Lucas and Honora Delgado

December 18, 1833

Honora tied off the package that contained the pages of the next chapter of *The Perils of Henrietta Hunter, Headmistress*—the serial she and Lucas had begun writing after they’d finally run out of story lines for Persephone White and Gabriel Jones the previous year—and handed it to the waiting hall boy. “And buy me a copy of *The Monthly Magazine* while you are out,” she added, holding out a shilling. “I’ve heard there is a wonderful story in it by an anonymous author, and I wish to read it.”

Stuart nodded his curly golden head assiduously. “Yes, my lady. Of course, my lady,” he said before dashing from the study to attend to the errand.

Smiling wryly, she watched the energetic youth depart. No matter how hard she tried, she hadn’t been able to break him of the habit of referring to her as “my lady.” To be fair, it had not been easy to convince the rest of the staff that, while her father was an



earl and she could therefore continue to use her courtesy title, she preferred plain Mrs. Delgado to the more obsequious forms of address.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Harry, had been the most frequent offender until Lucas had brought the young Stuart, a street urchin who'd attempted to pick his pocket, home last summer. It had been a gamble, of course, to offer the boy a position in service—not to mention an extravagance, for their modestly sized household had no need of a hall boy—but there'd been something guileless and charming about the gangly adolescent that had convinced them to give him a chance. Thus far, he'd more than proved himself worthy, demonstrating both cleverness and dependability in every task.

If only she could get him to stop m'ladying her...

She was about to turn back to the desk to sort through the last of the day's correspondence when Lucas appeared in the doorway, toting their five-month-old daughter in what Honora could only describe as a sort of portable hammock. The ingenious device had been a gift from her mother-in-law and could be worn in a number of different configurations to allow an adult to securely carry an infant while keeping both hands free for other tasks.

This afternoon, Lucas had slung the continuous loop of fabric over one shoulder and settled Ixchel—properly named Isabella after Lucas's mother but nicknamed after the Mayan goddess of rain on account of having been born on a fiercely stormy day—on the opposite hip so she could peer out at her surroundings. Honora's heart did slow somersault at the sight of the pair. Was there anything more attractive than a handsome man carrying a curly-headed, rosy-cheeked baby as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a father to do? And Lucas was looking particularly fine in his austere blue waistcoat and crisp, expertly tied cravat.

Ixchel, with her dark hair and equally dark eyes, was very much her husband's daughter, although Honora suspected the cherubic chubbiness of her face would melt away to reveal the square, stubborn Pearce chin. She certainly had a mind of her own and a

will to match, as evidenced by her preference for her papa's company over her nursemaid's and, occasionally, even her mother's. Honora could hardly blame her daughter, however, for she shared the predilection.

A tendril of desire tightened in her belly as she imagined him removing those starchy, reserved items of clothing to reveal the taut, chiseled body beneath. To think she had once believed herself incapable of such emotions and sensations! How mistaken she had been. And how fortunate that she had made the superficially foolish decision to rush into Rickert & Sons ahead of the police on that fateful afternoon. Otherwise, she might have spent the rest of her life without ever meeting the two most important people in the world to her.

"Please tell me you are nearly done," her husband said, interrupting her train of thought. "Your daughter is looking for her next meal, and I haven't got the proper equipment."

At this reminder, Honora realized her breasts had become rather heavy. She'd quite lost track of the time.

Ixchel, having laid eyes upon her mother, jutted out her lower lip and stretched out her arms, her smooth brow furrowing with impending displeasure. Lucas jostled her up and down to forestall any crying.

"The rest can wait for tomorrow morning's post," Honora agreed.

But as they headed toward the staircase that led to the third floor and the nursery, the footman, Peters, exited the parlor, closed the door, and started down the corridor in their direction so abruptly that they nearly collided.

"I beg your pardon, sir, mil—madam," the servant exclaimed, breathless and slightly red-faced. Peters possessed neither the exceptional good looks nor the prodigious stature demanded of footmen in fashionable households, but he was reliable, scrupulously well-groomed, and generally unflappable in his demeanor, and those qualities were more than sufficient for Lucas

and Honora's needs. But those virtues made his current perturbation all the more alarming.

"I say, whatever is the matter?" Lucas asked, clapping a steadying hand on the young man's shoulder. "Have you shown a fire-breathing dragon into the parlor?"

"Worse. It is Mr. Noel Langston, sir."

For heaven's sake, Honora thought irritably, why should Peters be in a tizzy over a visit from her cousin? Noel lived just two doors down the street in a townhouse nearly identical to their own. The entire block of modest terraces belonged to her parents—all except their own, of course, which had been a wedding gift—and her father rented the rest to MPs from far-flung boroughs for whom finding affordable accommodations in London was often a challenge. When her cousin had won the seat for his hometown in Cumbria in the first election after passage of the Reform Act, it had been natural that one of the vacant houses would go to him. And it had been just as natural that Noel would call upon her and Lucas with great frequency, especially since the three of them often discussed pending legislation and political strategy.

Yet here was Peters, behaving as though her cousin were some notorious ne'er-do-well whose call was both unexpected and unwelcome.

"Noel," her husband repeated, obviously as perplexed as she was. "Is something the matter with him?"

The footman swallowed hard, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing visibly. "No, sir, he seems well enough. It is just that he has a—" With a cough, Peters glanced furtively over his shoulder before finishing, "A lady with him." His cheeks flushed, and he practically whispered the final words, "And she is with child."

So *that* was it. Peters' delicate sensibilities had been set off by the sight of a pregnant woman. Perhaps he had jumped to some interesting and unquestionably inaccurate conclusions because the lady was in her cousin's company. Knowing Noel as she did, however, Honora was quite certain that whatever his reasons might

be, they were neither prurient nor disreputable.

She exchanged a look with Lucas, who read her expression and nodded. He said, "I'll take Ixchel to the nursery while you see to your cousin. I'm sure I can put her off for another ten or fifteen minutes."

Once her husband had mounted the stairs with their daughter, Honora turned to the footman. "I have everything well in hand, Peters."

The young man's features smoothed with obvious relief, and he bowed from the neck before heading back down to his usual station on the ground floor.

Entering the parlor, Honora said, "Well, Noel, you've thoroughly scandalized my poor footman," and then broke off, drawing up short. Perhaps the servant's reaction hadn't been quite as wrong-headed or melodramatic as she had first thought.

Her cousin stood beside one of the two chairs that flanked the fireplace hearth, stationed like a guard between whoever might come through the door and the chair's occupant. But it was that occupant who took Honora's breath away.

"Stunning" was the only proper word for the young woman perched there. Her face could have been molded by Pygmalion in the pursuit of perfection. The bright, cerulean color of her irises were probably her most arresting facial feature, but singling them out for attention gave short shrift to their setting, for her heart-shaped face with its dimpled chin and prominent cheekbones would have been exquisite on their own. Even her nose—seldom the best element of anyone's features—was delicate and lovely, with a pretty Grecian slope and button tip. Only the light sprinkle of freckles across her nose and cheeks might reasonably be called a flaw, and these merely served to highlight the velvety smoothness of her complexion.

And then there was her hair. Though she wore a plain day cap that had likely once been white but had since turned to ecru with age and use, a few red-gold curls escaped near her temples and

cheeks, as vivid and showy as a sunset after a summer thunderstorm.

She sat with the straight, graceful posture of someone who had been raised to be a lady, but nothing else about her appearance suggested any such thing. Her dress was made of plain brown worsted wool and showed signs of wear in the form of fraying fabric and pulled seams. If she had worn a wrap—and on a day as chilly as this, she would have needed one to be comfortable—it must have been left in the entry hall. The boots that peeked from beneath the tattered hem of her skirt had once been black but were scuffed and worn to an iron-gray hue. She also wore no gloves, but folded her bare hands genteelly in her lap, just beneath the enormous bulge of her belly.

And the bulge truly was enormous. No wonder Peters had been shaken. Women at so advanced a stage of pregnancy generally did not leave their homes for fear of going into labor at an inopportune moment. By Honora's reckoning, this lady—and she would consider this woman a lady and not, as she suspected her servant had done, a doxy who had somehow cozened her way into Noel's good graces, at least until proved otherwise—was due to give birth any time between today and the next several weeks.

What in the name of perdition was going on here?

Fortunately, she did not have to ask the question, for almost before she'd had time to make all of these observations, her cousin said, "I apologize for the intrusion, cuz, but I could not think who else to go to on such short notice." Stepping slightly aside to provide Honora with a clearer sight line to the lady in the chair, he said with a flourish, "Lady Honora Delgado, please allow me to present to you Miss Catriona Fergusson."

There was that blasted *lady* again.

She did not scold, however, because Miss Fergusson made to get to her feet to complete the introduction.

"Oh, goodness, Miss Fergusson," Honora said hastily, "please, stay where you are. I remember how difficult it was to get up and

down at that stage.”

Noel flashed a knowing look at Miss Fergusson. “You see?” Turning back to Honora, he continued, “I am hoping you might be able to lend Miss Fergusson a few items of clothing that will fit her in her current condition. I’m afraid this is the only dress she presently possesses that she can wear.”

This revelation should not have come as any surprise to Honora. After all, if Miss Ferguson had another dress, she would be wearing that one unless, of course, it was in an even more deplorable state. Her heart clutched at the thought of a young woman, late in her pregnancy, having nothing to wear but one ragged dress.

And so near to Christmas, too! It was like having Mary and Joseph show up on her doorstep on the way to Bethlehem to ask her help. She did not see how she refuse, even if she wanted to, which she did not. Allowing Miss Ferguson the use of a few of the gowns she’d worn late in her own pregnancy was hardly any sort of hardship.

But even as she made up her mind that she would help in any way she could, Honora burned with curiosity. *Who* was Miss Ferguson to her cousin, the man who had told her he would never take a woman to his bed outside the bonds of marriage, lest he inadvertently father a child? Honora knew Noel too well to believe he would have reneged upon his vow, and yet, why would he bring Miss Fergusson here if he did not have some intimate connection with her? The Miss—notably *not* Mrs.—told a story in and of itself; the lady was both with child and unwed. Noel had always been a champion of reforms that would improve the lot of women, including and perhaps most especially the “fallen” ones, and children; it had been one of his promises when he’d run for office. Nevertheless, that advocacy had never strayed into the realm of offering such personal assistance to perfect strangers. On the other hand, she could not credit that they were lovers or that the child Miss Ferguson carried was her cousin’s.

Her mind whirled, but she managed to respond to her cousin’s

request without blurting out any of the questions that hovered on the tip of her tongue. "Of course, I would be happy to do that. Although," she added apologetically as she glanced out the front window at the gray drizzle that would likely turn to sleet or even snow by nightfall, "I'm afraid most of the items that are likely to fit will have been made for much warmer weather than we're having now, so we shall have to find a few wraps that will suit to keep you warm."

"That is very kind of you," Miss Fergusson murmured. God, even her voice was lovely, clear and musical as bells but without a hint of shrillness. Under other circumstances, Honora might have been inclined to envy the other woman.

"It is no trouble at all," Honora assured her visitor. To Noel, she said, "I'll have to ask Nicks to find them in the back of the clothes press. How soon do you need them?"

Her cousin swallowed and his cheeks turned pink. "Well, the truth is, I was hoping we might leave with them within the hour," he admitted, his tone sheepish. With a diffident glance at his companion that spoke volumes as to the shallowness of their acquaintance, he cleared his throat and continued, "You see, Miss Fergusson and I must be on our way to Scotland this afternoon."

*Scotland?*

Honora inhaled sharply. There was only one reason for a man and a woman to travel together on short notice to Scotland.

Her cousin planned to *marry* Miss Fergusson.

**The End...or is it?**

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading *A Bit of Rough*. As you've probably already guessed, the next book in *The House of Uncommons* series will be Noel Langston and Catriona Fergusson's story. *First Comes Marriage* is available for preorder now on all vendors except Amazon with a tentative release date of November 9, 2021. On Amazon, the release date is showing as June 22, 2022, but I'm pretty sure it won't be *that* long. You can click [here](#) to preorder from any vendor where it's currently available.

I have to confess that *A Bit of Rough* is a book I didn't plan to write. Originally, *First Comes Marriage* was meant to be the first book in *The House of Uncommons*, but when I started writing it, I arrived at a point in the story where I needed to find Catriona something to wear on the trip to Scotland other than the one dress she possessed. I decided Noel's cousin, Honora, would be the source of that gown. But as soon as I had that idea, I realized I wanted to know how she had come to be married and a mother.

I'd also known for quite some time that I wanted to feature a character of native Mexican ancestry in a historical. My husband is of Mexican descent and in recent years, we've developed close ties with a family in Merida through their son, who lived with us while attending high school and then college from 2018 through 2020. (He just returned this month after more than a year and will be with us for another two years.)

We had visited the Yucatan peninsula once before in 2012 and instantly fell in love with the warm climate, the amazing cuisine, and the kindness of the people, but it was our visit in June of 2019 to watch our "volunteer son" play water polo in Mexico's version of Junior Olympics that made us decide we wanted to put down roots



in Merida. We made an offer on a house the following January and finally closed this past February.

None of this makes me even close to an expert in either Mexican culture or history, but I have learned a great deal that I didn't know before. One of the most intriguing (to me) is the fact that the Mexican War of Independence was kicked off by Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Spain in 1808. Many of the people in what was then New Spain were none too pleased about the idea of a French viceroy and fought back. That fact made me think about the intersections between British and Mexican interests and how a family fleeing Mexico during the Regency could very well wind up taking refuge in England. And thus, Lucas's backstory was born.

I don't want to bore you with a lot of details, but I do want to mention that [Gonzalo Guerrero](#), [Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo](#), [Vicente Guerrero](#), and [Anastasio Bustamante](#) were all real people, and it's worth reading their Wikipedia pages (which I've linked you to) because each of them played a significant role—for better and, in at least one case, worse—in the development of the “other” united states in North America.

The idea for this series first came to me when I was writing *My True Love Gave to Me* in August or September of 2020. I'd been planning a “duke” series next—complete with very punny titles—but in the midst of the pandemic and with the prospect of another four years of *He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named* in the Oval Office looming over us, I just wasn't feeling it anymore. I decided I wanted to write about characters who don't just give lip service to progressive ideals and liberal values, but who put their money where their mouths are. A spinoff from *The Lords of Lancashire* series was an obvious vehicle, because the children of its protagonists would be reaching adulthood at exactly the right time to have a hand in the social upheaval and political reforms of the early 1830s.

Unlike the United States of America, which enshrined freedom of speech and the press way back in 1791, Great Britain provided no such protections to its citizens. Anyone who criticized the

government in writing could be charged with *seditious libel*. Particularly after the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, arrests and prosecutions for this so-called crime became more numerous than ever, and truth was no defense against the charge. This made publishing a newspaper like Lucas's *The Weekly Disciple* a risky endeavor, but ironically, the more the government tried to crack down on speech it considered injurious to the crown, the more such publications popped up and the more popular they became with working class people. It was pretty much whack-a-mole, and a good many publishers who were tried and imprisoned for seditious libel went right back to their old habits as soon as they were set free.

Richard Carlile, whose *Every Woman's Book* is mentioned in this story, is one such author/publisher. Not only was he arrested and charged with seditious libel, blasphemy, and blasphemous libel (he was an avowed atheist), but when he was imprisoned for refusing to pay the fine, he turned publication of his newspaper, *The Republican*, to his common-law wife, and *she* was arrested and jailed as well. Undaunted, Carlile turned publication over to his sister and, when she was arrested, to his shop workers, one by one. In total, 150 people went to prison for the crime of publishing Carlile's newspaper. I'm not sure if this makes him a hero or a villain, to be honest, but his experiences and those of other publishers like him who refused to remain anonymous are the reason I decided that Lucas and Honora would both keep their identities secret.

One of the other ways in which the British government tried to keep a lid on the press was through stamp duty. First imposed in 1712, stamp duty (or stamp tax) was ostensibly a tax on *paper*, since the amount was based on the number of sheets used, and applied to newspapers, pamphlets, legal documents, advertisements, and the like. Books and magazines were generally exempt. After Peterloo, Parliament passed a bill known as *Six Acts*, which expanded the stamp tax to any publication that sold for less than six pence, contained an opinion about the government, or which were published more often than every twenty-six days. By 1831, when A

*Bit of Rough* takes place, the duty on newspapers was four pence per newspaper sheet. This would raise the cost of a three-sheet paper from a few pennies to more than a shilling, which would put purchase beyond the means of the intended audience. For obvious reasons, most publishers of small newspapers like Lucas did not pay the tax and thus were printing illegally.

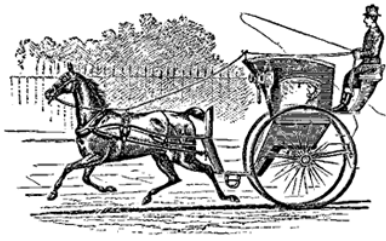
Even as publishers decried the stamp tax (and even those who could afford to pay it opposed it), there was no chance of repealing or reducing it without reform of the electoral system. The Peterloo Massacre, which I've mentioned before, was kicked off when a crowd assembled in Manchester to demand reform of Parliamentary representation. The problems with the existing system were manifest, but conservatives—who were overly represented in the House of Lords, at the time an unelected body made up of peers—blocked every effort to expand the franchise and redraw the boundaries of boroughs. By 1800, Manchester was a city of about 95,000 people but did not have a single representative in the House of Commons. Meanwhile, Old Sarum—which had just seven voters—continued to elect two MPs! This state of affairs could not hold, but resistance to change remained fierce for the next several decades.

The death of King George IV in 1830 triggered a general election. Although the conservative Tories won a majority of the seats, division among the Tory MPs allowed Earl Grey, the leader of the liberal Whigs, to form a government and take up the cause of electoral reform. This government fell apart less than a year later, when the Reform Act failed to pass on a technicality. The election of 1831, which resulted in a landslide victory for Whigs, followed the collapse and is the election featured in this story. After the Reform Act passed in 1832, another election was called because borough boundaries were redrawn, with seats in the Commons both eliminated and created, and because significantly more citizens now had the right to vote. The resulting Parliament—still led by Earl Grey—went on to pass legislation in 1833 abolishing slavery and

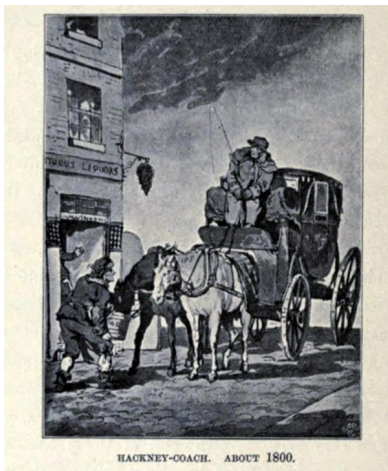
limiting (though not outlawing) child labor in factories.

For fans of Charles Dickens, there's an Easter egg in the epilogue. If you didn't catch it and are curious, search online for *Sketches by Boz*.

Finally, if you were visualizing Lucas and Honora traveling in a hansom cab (picture below) and wondering how he could get away with fingering her without anyone noticing, please note that the hansom was not invented until 1834.



Before the invention of the hansom, there were two styles of “hackneys” in use, the hackney “coach” and the hackney “cab” (which looks much more like a hansom). Please take it as given that Honora and Lucas hired a hackney *coach* rather than a hackney *cab*.





Once again, my sincerest thanks to my beta readers—Carrie Lomax, Eve Pendle, Dee Tenorio, and Joanne Renaud—and to my copy editor, Rhonda Merwarth, who always manages to squeeze me in despite my penchant for missing deadlines. I also have to give a major shout-out to my “sprinting partner” and accountability buddy, Zoe Archer/Eva Leigh. I sincerely doubt I’d ever finish anything if she wasn’t there, forcing me to put my butt in the chair and my hands on the keyboard.

If you stuck with me this far and you haven’t read my *Lords of Lancashire* series yet, I hope you’ll give it a try. The first book, *The Lesson Plan*, is a *very steamy* novella featuring Honora’s parents, Freddie and Conrad Pearce, and I’m sure you’ll enjoy seeing them early in their relationship. I know that revisiting them was one of the most enjoyable parts of writing this book.

Thanks again for spending your time with the people in my head and for bearing with my penchant for giving a history lesson at the end of every book. I really do enjoy the historical research part of this gig, and it seems a shame not to share some of what I learn when I fall down the rabbit hole. Or maybe it’s just that misery loves company. Either way, I appreciate your willingness to read all the way to *The End*.

—Jackie

Also By Jackie Barbosa

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*The House of Uncommons*

A Bit of Rough

First Comes Marriage

The Bedding Vow

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## First Comes Marriage

***The House of Uncommons* continues with Noel Langston and Catriona Fergusson's story, *First Comes Marriage*. Read the blurb and first chapter (unedited) below.**

Catriona Fergusson never expected to wind up in a London workhouse, but then, she never expected to be disowned by her family or to become a married man's mistress. Falling pregnant when her protector believes he cannot father children is simply the latest calamity to strike her. Turned out of her home and stripped of funds, she has few choices and fewer friends.

Recently elected to the House of Commons, Noel Langston is on a mission to reform England's cruel treatment of the poor, especially women and children. A foundling himself, he understands better than most the fate that awaits those who cannot afford to care for themselves or their offspring. So when he stumbles upon the mistress of his bitterest political rival during a visit to a workhouse, he is both shocked and horrified. Upon realizing that she is pregnant, he sees an opportunity to help her and her unborn child...and to ruffle the feathers of the politician who most often stands in the way of Noel's reformist agenda.

First comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage. Can love come last?

## Chapter One

*London, December 18, 1833*

The main room of St. James's Parish Workhouse was not quite as grim as Noel Langston had expected. Between the high ceiling supported at twelve-foot intervals by sturdy wooden pillars and the tall mullioned windows along the main wall, the space was both airy and well-lit. Tables and benches were distributed throughout the large room, and each was occupied by one or more persons engaged in some form of labor. All of them were female as the primary tasks appeared to be the sewing of clothing and linens along with the carding and spinning of wool, although there were a handful of men, likely employed to empty and refill the large buckets of wash-water on a periodic basis. The laborers ranged in age from as young as nine or ten years old to so elderly that Noel would not have hazarded a guess as to an exact figure. Everyone seemed to be in a state of good health, even the oldest of the inhabitants, and all were wrapped in warm woolen shawls to guard against the deep chill that permeated the room. The shawls looked very new.

He glanced at his companions, Desmond Faircloth and Arthur Cox, to gauge what they made of the tableau. Both men bore expressions of careful neutrality, which told Noel they had the same impression he did.

Their visit had been expected. The scene had been staged.

Noel turned toward the matron, Mrs. Chappell, a sturdy woman in her mid-forties, and said, "I would like to speak to some of the residents if I may."

As he anticipated, her features flickered with consternation, but she nodded. "Of course, sir." She gestured in the direction of the table placed nearest the window, where a half dozen women were working together to assemble items of clothing from a bolt of grey fabric. "I am sure the ladies there would be amenable to a chat. But please, do not take up too much of their time."

Arching an eyebrow at his friends, Noel strode across the floor



to the indicated group and removed his hat. "Good afternoon," he said, sketching a polite bow. In his experience, it was never a mistake to be courteous. "Could I trouble you to answer a few questions?"

All of the women—although the youngest looked no more than thirteen and was thus a girl—stopped what they were doing and stared at him. He wasn't sure if their obvious astonishment sprang from his request or his deferential attitude, but they exchanged glances with one another before nodding.

"Aye, gov'nor," said a thin woman with a leathery complexion and a missing front tooth. "What d'ye want to know?"

He gestured around the room. "Would you say this is a typical work day here? The number of people and the types of tasks they are performing and so on."

The woman shrugged. "I reckon so. Hard to tell the difference one day to the next, ain't it?"

Noel repressed a sigh. These people were dependent on the good graces of the master and matron of the workhouse and if they'd been told to put on a good show to make conditions appear less dire than they were, he could hardly expect them to betray the truth. Especially not when the matron of the house was in earshot.

And perhaps his own history made him susceptible to claims of abuse and privation in workhouses. Here but for the grace of God went he.

If the cruelty and privations were as severe as rumors had led him to believe, however, then a different approach was in order.

He gave the group his most winning smile. In his experience, that particular expression tended to soften even the most resistant members of the opposite sex. "I suppose it would be in such a large space," he agreed. "But tell me, is it always this cold in here during the winter months?"

"Oh, aye," another member of the group answered. She was a short and round but the loose folds of skin around her chin and neck suggested recent—and likely unintentional—weight loss. "But

we ‘ave these, don’t we?” By way of illustration, she pulled the brown woolen shawl tighter to her body.

“Yes, they look very warm. And quite new.”

“That’s because we got them this morning,” piped in the adolescent girl. Her expression was utterly guileless as she twirled to model the garment, which covered her upper body adequately but could not conceal the tattered, threadbare state of her skirts and stockings or the holes that were beginning to form at the toes of her too-small slippers.

There was a collective intake of breath from all the women at the table, and Noel saw several of them shoot furtive glances behind him toward Mrs. Chappell. Having got at least some of what he needed to make his case as to the appalling state of even the best of London’s workhouses, he nodded gravely at the child and said, “An early Christmas present, no doubt, to replace the ones you had before.” Turning to look over his shoulder at the stony-faced matron, he gave her the same sunny smile and went on before the girl could correct his intentional misapprehension, “’Tis the season for such munificence, is it not?”

Mrs. Chappell’s answering smile was as false as her generosity. “It is but a small price to pay to ensure that our charges are kept warm in the winter months.”

A price Noel felt quite certain the parish would not have paid at all had they not been informed that three members of Parliament would be visiting the workhouse a week before Christmas.

Cox met Noel’s gaze and rolled his eyes heavenward. He was no more fooled than Noel was.

But his efforts at reassuring the women who’d feared reprisals nonetheless bore fruit, for they seemed to expel a breath of relief. He decided, however, that it would be best not to press his luck by asking further questions. He might elicit another inadvertent admission that would put paid to the lie everyone was desperately trying to project, but at what cost? At least, thanks to their visit, these women were better armed against the cold. If he did or said

anything to suggest he wasn't convinced by the show, whoever Mrs. Chappell blamed for the failure might well be punished by the confiscation of her shawl. He could not be responsible for that.

Bowing again to the women, he thanked them for answering his questions and wished them a happy holiday. To Faircloth and Cox he said, "Seen enough, gentlemen?"

Faircloth flicked his eyes around the space, as if mentally mapping everything he saw for future reference, and then looked over at Cox for confirmation. When the other man nodded, so did Faircloth.

Noel was about to take his first step away from the table when a woman from somewhere behind him and to his left called out, "Please, sir. Wait." Her voice was strong but not shrill, calmly pitched and melodious.

He checked himself in mid-stride and turned in the direction whence the sound had come. There were several benches and tables beyond the one to which Mrs. Chappell had directed him, and he scanned the crowd in search of the woman who had spoken. Fortunately, she obviously wanted him to know who she was, for she raised her hand to draw his attention.

His first impression of her, however, was limited by the fact that several people stood between them. She sat on a bench that was perhaps five feet from the table, and like Mrs. Chappell had no doubt heard the entire conversation. Like the rest of the occupants of the room, she had one of the new woolen shawls wrapped around her torso and the top of her head was obscured by a white cap. As his gaze came to rest upon her, she lifted something from her lap—no doubt an item she was meant to be sewing—and set it on the empty bench beside her.

"Yes, madam," he responded, though at this point, he could not tell whether she was old or young. "How may I be of assistance?"

As he spoke, the people standing in his line of sight stepped aside, affording him a clearer view. At the same time, she pushed the bench and rose with some difficulty to her feet. It was then that

he realized two things. The first was that she was heavy with child; within four to six weeks of her confinement if he was any judge. The second was that he *knew* her.

Oh, not intimately. Nor, in fact, even personally, for they had never been formally introduced. He had seen her a grand total of three times: once late last November in a hat shop where he'd been shopping for Christmas presents for a multiplicity of female relations; a second time in March when he'd gone to see Edmund and Charles Kean in *King Lear* at Covent Garden just a few days before the former's dramatic onstage death; and finally at Vauxhall Gardens in late May or early June. On none of these occasions had they spoken to one another, but he had been informed of her identity by one of his companions on the second occasion and had it confirmed on the third.

There was no chance whatsoever that he was mistaken in his identification, however, despite the glancing nature of their acquaintance. He would have recognized her anywhere, even with her flaming red hair tucked beneath a cap and her perfectly sculpted features grown slightly hollow since last he'd seen her. For Catriona Fergusson was the mistress of The Dishonorable Mr. Charles Burleigh, sitting member of the House of Commons and Noel's staunchest adversary in advancing his reformist proposals to the floor.

Noel felt as if he had been knocked alongside the head with a croquet mallet—stunned and confused. The child she carried must be Burleigh's; to all accounts, she had been his paramour for over nine years and the union was considered by all who knew them to be the love match that his mercenary marriage was not. And yet, here she was, in St. James' Parish Workhouse, which clearly signified not only that her association with Burleigh had come to an end but that it had come to a *disastrous* one. He could think of only one reason for a man to turn out his pregnant mistress in disgrace and without upkeep, and yet, he could not credit it.

"You may assist me," Miss Fergusson began, "by not crediting

the lies you have been shown and told today.” Her cultured contralto was steady and confident, but rang hollowly in his ears thanks to his utter astonishment at finding her here.

Her words were punctuated by audible gasps, hisses of fury, and cries of “No, you mustn’t!” and “How could you?” and other, similar exclamations from nearly every other woman in the room.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Fergusson said in a loud, ringing tone, “I am sorry, but surely we cannot allow this sham to continue. We must not think only of ourselves, but of our sisters who will continue to suffer if we do not speak.”

Several women moved in her direction, as though thinking to tackle her, but halted uncertainly when Miss Fergusson threw off her shawl to reveal the thin, shabby work dress and the full extent of her swollen abdomen.

“The women you see are but half of those who reside and work here on a normal day. Last evening after dinner, that woman,” here, she pointed an accusatory finger in Mrs. Chappell’s direction, “told those of us who look strongest and healthiest that only we were to appear for work today, while the rest would be confined to the dormitory and were to keep out of sight. This morning we were given these new wraps and told we would receive extra rations at dinner for the next week if we kept our mouths shut and told any visitors that we are treated well and fairly here. We were also told that, should any of us speak out against the parish, every one of us would lose our nice, new shawls and be put on half-rations until Twelfth Night.” She smiled serenely as her compatriots fixed her with glares that ranged from bitter to hostile to horrified.

In retrospect, Noel would marvel that utter chaos did not erupt right then and there. Under the circumstances, he would not have entirely faulted any of the women had they transformed into maenads and ripped Miss Fergusson to shreds. But instead, everyone simply stood frozen in place, transfixed by the enormity of what she had chosen to do.

Somehow, his wits reasserted themselves quickly enough to

avert catastrophe. Miss Fergusson was well-educated and clever, and she had realized that the parish would be unable to follow through on the threats that had been made. By revealing what the workhouse's staff had been desperately trying to hide from Noel and his companions, she had made it impossible for them to punish anyone...at least in the short term. In fact, parish officials would now be forced to do the precise opposite to prove her allegations false. Not only were all of the women in the room safe from the consequences they feared, but those who had been kept off the floor to hide their infirmity would likely receive better care as well.

For the briefest of seconds, he met Miss Fergusson's gaze, and the understanding between them was instant and electric. She dipped her chin in acknowledgment that she knew what he was about to do and why.

Ignoring the twinge of guilt in his chest, he turned to look at Mrs. Chappell, whose face was a blank, impenetrable mask. She opened her mouth to speak, no doubt to deny the charges, but Noel saved her the trouble. "I am sure this lady must be mistaken," he said, hating himself for the falsehood despite its necessity. "I'm certain that the parish chose to give the weaker, sicker workers a well-deserved respite from now through the end of the Christmas holiday, and that this good woman misunderstood an act of Christian charity. The rest..." Shaking his head as though he was saddened by Miss Fergusson's inexplicable fabrication, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, she is mistaken," Mrs. Chappell responded hotly. "You are quite right, Mr. Langston; we have indeed decided to give those who are not in the best of health the entire Christmas season off, from now until Twelfth Night." Her eyes narrowed. "Perhaps that is where she heard the reference to Twelfth Night, though why she would invent such a malicious lie, I cannot imagine. We keep our residents properly clothed and well-nourished. To do otherwise would be not merely unfathomable, but in direct conflict with our Christian duty."

Desmond, standing to the matron's left, rolled his eyes heavenward. Arthur, by contrast, looked puzzled for several seconds, but then his expression cleared and he coughed into a hastily drawn handkerchief to cover what Noel was certain would otherwise have been laughter. Though not an amused sort of laughter.

Noel's mouth tasted bitter, but he felt certain that even his parents would approve him lying under these circumstances, so he forged ahead. "Perhaps it is her condition. I understand that some women can become somewhat unhinged at this stage of confinement."

He felt, rather than heard, the ripple of reaction to this suggestion and knew that he had probably offended more than half of the women in the room, but there was naught to be done for it.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Chappell responded with a scowl. "But even so, the parish can hardly be expected to continue supporting her, given her obvious discontentment with us. She may keep the shawl, of course, but she must seek relief elsewhere, I think."

Better that than remain under this roof, Noel thought. If Miss Fergusson stayed here, she would certainly suffer reprisals, and probably not only from parish officials, but from her fellow residents who would no doubt see her actions as a betrayal.

The question was where she could go.

And then he had an idea. One so cunning and yet so righteous that he simultaneously reproached and congratulated himself for it.

He could marry her.